



NEW LINE CINEMA

EVIL GETS AN UPGRADE



JASONTM

A NOVEL BY PAT CADIGAN
BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE WRITTEN
BY TODD FARMER. BASED ON
CHARACTERS CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

ONE

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

The fact that the young soldier who stood in the semi-dark room had more than a passing acquaintance with the works of Friedrich Nietzsche would have come as an enormous surprise to the rest of the soldiers in his squadron—well, for those who actually knew who Friedrich Nietzsche was, anyway. Even the young soldier's commanding officer, a grizzled career man who made a point of not caring what any of the men under his authority knew as long as they jumped when he said "Frog, you maggots!" would have raised his steel-wool eyebrows over that one. But then, when the CO had first reviewed the roster, he had taken note, albeit somewhat absently, that the young soldier's name was Samuel Johnson. The officer was an educated man, career military notwithstanding, and it had crossed his mind at the time to hope that anyone bearing that name wouldn't turn out to be a complete moron.

Since then, he had had no occasion to give Corporal Johnson any further thought, which meant that the soldier had not registered with him or anyone else as being either remarkably gifted or lacking in brain power. For those in the rank-and-file, this is the ideal situation and even if he were not quite as gifted as his namesake, Samuel Johnson was smart enough to know it. He was also smart enough to know that instead of standing there gazing into the abyss, he should have been sitting in the sentry pillbox across the room keeping the machine gun trained directly on this monster at all times. Those were his orders. If the CO or one of the scientists came in and found him standing around gawking like he was in some kind of museum, he'd be in a world of hurt.

Schmuel Chaim Johnson (as his parents called him) had actually been named for his maternal grandfather rather than an icon of English literature now two hundred years dead. He had always been fairly intelligent, but was also practical and resourceful, and had joined the military simply to serve out the minimum time required to reap the benefits of having served his country in uniform. In particular, the benefit that would allow him to enroll in college under

the GI Bill. Over the decades, there had been a number of attempts to eliminate or pare down the GI Bill. None of them had succeeded. Johnson's Uncle Geraldo (married to his Aunt Tova) suggested that the promise of higher education was probably a major factor in the continued existence of the armed forces, although Johnson suspected that if Uncle Geraldo could have met the guys in his squadron, he would have changed his tune in a hurry. There wasn't a whole lot of college material showing in the barracks. Of course, they all could have been in hiding, like he was.

In any case, Johnson was now just under three weeks away from the end of his hitch; so short he couldn't see over the top of a chair, as the guys in his squad put it. Although he didn't exactly feel like he was coasting yet, he was comfortable and optimistic. However, right at this moment, he was none too happy. Of all the assignments he had pulled during his time in the military, guard duty had never been one of his favorites. But what he was doing right now was the absolute worst of the worst. It made all the other guard duty he had ever done seem like a coffee break in comparison.

The best you could say for guard duty was that it was boring as hell. It was like having to watch a test pattern on a TV screen with complete, unwavering attention. The boredom was excruciating; your mind begged to wander but you couldn't let it. You had to stay alert, pay attention both to what you were guarding and to your surroundings. Of the many different things Johnson had guarded over the years—warehouses, compound entrances, encampments, jeeps, payroll trucks, military prisoners, a few bridges, a general's limousine, and on one memorable occasion, a hole dug in a field—none of it had inspired thoughts of the home-spun folk-wisdom of the *Farmer's Almanac* in him, let alone the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. But then, as stupid and bored as he had felt guarding a hole in the ground, it had only been a hole in the ground, not an abyss. Of course, the Grand Canyon was only a hole in the ground compared to what he was staring at right now.

And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

Never had Schmuel Chaim Johnson understood the essence of those words so well as he did at this moment. His grandfather, the original Schmuel Chaim, had once told him that with understanding

came wisdom, which in turn elevated the human spirit and brought man closer to Y-hw-h.

It was obvious to young Sam Johnson that his zayde had never laid eyes on anything like Jason Voorhees. This monster had nothing to do with wisdom or the elevation of the human spirit, and certainly wasn't related to anything godly. It was the pure antithesis of godly; it was the debasement of humankind, endowed with brutality not wisdom, and wasn't interested in either understanding or being understood.

It sure made him wonder about Nietzsche, though. If Nietzsche had come face to face with this sort of thing back in his day, then Johnson felt very sorry for him. However, Johnson hoped that wasn't the case. He didn't like knowing that he had read anything written by someone capable of only imagining the abyss. A person who could do that wouldn't have to fight a monster to become one. Either way, Johnson decided he wasn't going to waste any pity on Nietzsche. The son of a bitch was dead, his troubles were over. He didn't have to stand guard duty for an abyss, gazing at it and having it gaze back. Literally.

Johnson knew the thing was looking at him. There was a glint in its single remaining eye from the only bright light in the room, which shone directly down on it where it stood on a small round dais. If it had blinked, Johnson had missed it. The thing was completely motionless and silent, wrapped in a straitjacket that had been modified to accommodate two sets of heavy chains, one set coming down from the ceiling, the other bolted to the floor around the platform. But in case that wasn't enough (and from what Johnson knew, it wasn't), the medics had set up an IV with an industrial-strength tranquilizer and plugged it right into the thing's neck. The clear bag dangling from the metal tree behind the thing was easily three times the size of a normal IV bag, and the medics had strict orders not to let the fluid inside sink lower than the one quarter mark before they changed it for a full one.

The medics had changed the bag twice since Johnson had been on duty, both times well before the fluid fell to the minimum level. They had worked fast, obviously terrified, and Johnson couldn't blame them. He wasn't quite as terrified (or so he told himself) but he wasn't a fool. As the CO had told them at the briefing, the only people who didn't need to be afraid of this thing were already dead, so

anyone who didn't want to join them had better get scared and stay that way.

Some smart-ass (probably Danvers, who never missed a chance to mouth off) had wanted to know till when. Would that be all day, or the rest of the week, or even longer than that? "Cause I got plans for the weekend."

"Until further notice, private," the CO had replied. His voice had been so grave that the laughter died away immediately. "Until you hear from me personally that there's nothing to be scared of any more. You want a ballpark figure, then I'd have to say, for the rest of your life. Unless you don't want that to be a long time."

Johnson had never been so creeped out by anything. But at least it had shut that clown Danvers up: nobody even heard him breathe loudly after that. Now he was even more creeped out as well as scared, having to guard this thing. But it could have been worse; Danvers could have been guarding this thing. His life and everyone else's in Danvers's hands? He'd have gone AWOL and the rest of the squad would have been right behind him.

Putting one hand on his sidearm, Johnson walked a slow circle around the dais, watching carefully for any movement, even if it was a seemingly involuntary tic. It should have been too heavily tranked even to remain conscious, let alone twitch, deliberately or otherwise. But it was awake; very awake Very alert, too. Johnson didn't need to see that glint in its eye to know. He could sense it.

Standing behind it, he looked the enormous misshapen figure up and down. Under the straitjacket, it still wore the tattered, filthy rags it had been captured in. Even if anyone had been reckless enough to make an attempt at stripping it, hosing it down, and getting it into clean clothes, there probably wasn't anything that would fit, short of a tarp with a hole cut in it for the thing's head. And that was assuming those rags would actually come off. It looked to Johnson like they had grown into the thing's flesh in layers that were years deep. As if whenever its clothing wore out it simply put something else on over it and kept going. Kept hacking, that is. Hacking away with its machete, as evidenced by the dirt upon stains upon stains upon dirt upon dirt and so forth. *Ad nauseam in extremis*. Johnson didn't blame the medics for just leaving it as it was. See that thing naked? No way, man, not for all the money in the world.

Johnson walked around to its other side and paused to survey it from a new angle. The IV was still stuck deeply and solidly into its neck, still pumping those trunks in. He had strict orders to call the medics if he saw even the slightest movement, because that would mean it was developing a tolerance and they would have to give it a stronger dose immediately. So far, he'd seen nothing; well, nothing except the glint in its eye that let him know it was awake. However, he was seriously considering calling the medics and telling them that he had seen the thing move so they would up the dosage. What the hell? Why wait and put everybody's life at risk? Most especially his own? You just couldn't take chances with this thing. Not unless you had a death wish.

As Johnson moved around in front of it again, he thought he saw the glint in its eye flicker slightly. Like the thing had deliberately looked at him, like it was watching him from behind that dented, battle-scarred hockey mask, watching his every move whenever he was in its limited visual field. Jesus. When you look into the abyss, the abyss didn't just look into you, it really kept its eye on you. The fucker actually had you under surveillance.

Well, he had had enough of that shit. He went back to the pillbox and picked up the blanket he had been sitting on. He might have to watch this monster but that didn't mean he had to go on actually looking at it for one more moment.

Johnson tossed the blanket over the monster's head and then stood back, satisfied for the first time since he had drawn this shit duty. So much for the abyss.

"Stare at that, you ugly son of a bitch," he said and turned away without noticing that the IV bag was swinging back and forth from the hook on the metal tree. Its vigorous movements were a result of the IV tube having been pulled loose from the monster's neck to dangle freely. Fluid dripped harmlessly out onto the floor.

TWO

In another room at the Crystal Lake Research Facility, not far away from where Johnson had just inadvertently freed the monster from its chemical restraints, Rowan LaFontaine was finishing up some paperwork in anticipation of the arrival later in the day of a man she hated almost as much as the creature that was Jason Voorhees.

No, Rowan decided as she closed one file folder and opened another, she actually hated Dr Wimmer a lot more. Jason Voorhees frightened the hell out of her but she did not feel the same poisonous contempt for the monster that she felt towards Wimmer. The man an arrogant, condescending, clueless fuck with delusions of godhood. Fortunately, he would be staying just long enough to take possession of Jason Voorhees's cryogenically frozen body and not a moment longer if Rowan had was anything to do with it. She would be only too glad to see the back of him.

She would also be only too glad not to have Jason Voorhees on the premises. Regardless of the fact that the restraints had held just as securely as the military had promised they would, she hadn't had a good night's sleep since they had brought the monster in and she knew that she wouldn't breathe easy while Jason was within a hundred miles of her. Even after he was frozen solid in the cryo-unit.

Handing the monster over to Wimmer, however, still made her nervous. The self-important prick had made it clear that he looked down on her and having to listen to instructions from her on mandatory safety measures was beneath him. It was obvious to her and to many of her colleagues at the facility that the great man was too concerned with his own standing in the scientific world to grasp exactly how dangerous Jason Voorhees was.

Of course, some of her other colleagues felt Wimmer's reputation was reason enough to be absolutely certain that he was the best person to take custody of Jason. Her boss Graciella Charles was one of them, which Rowan found a bit surprising since Dr Charles didn't like Wimmer any more than she did. But when Rowan had tried to talk to her about it, Dr Charles had refused to discuss it beyond stating that whether they liked him or not, Wimmer was the top scientific mind in the western hemisphere.

Privately, Rowan wondered exactly how Wimmer had achieved such a reputation and whether he was even half as brilliant as many people seemed to think. She couldn't see it herself and was pretty sure that this wasn't simply due to her extreme antipathy for the man. She didn't doubt that Wimmer was fairly bright, but she had the impression that it was more the sly cleverness of a conman than true intellectual brilliance. If so, then he was bound to make a mistake sooner or later, a real biggie that would expose him for the posturing fraud he really was. When that time came, Rowan hoped she would have a front row seat where she could enjoy every glorious bit of his humiliation, close up, in detail, and very, very personal.

She then caught herself and felt her face grow warm as mild shame swept through her. As much as she disliked Wimmer, this wasn't the type of thinking she should have been indulging in. It was neither healthy nor constructive and if she kept it up, she would accomplish nothing. She would wake up some day and find that she was nothing more than intellectual deadwood sulking in the corner of some obscure laboratory with her best years behind her, bitter and twisted and ultimately even more unlikable than Wimmer. She could think of a couple of people whose lives had gone just that way and she didn't want to end up like that just because she couldn't stand that asshole Wimmer.

Rowan tucked a strand of long dark hair behind her ear, finished filling out the last form, and slipped it into the file folder. There, mission accomplished, paperwork done. It had taken two hours to do something that would have taken fifteen minutes on her laptop but she hadn't had any say in the matter. Leave it to Wimmer to be one of those people who insisted on hard copy rather than accepting it all via email. Probably because he didn't know how to download an attachment. He was probably doing well to open his own email.

She was chuckling to herself when she heard voices in the hallway outside her office. One voice in particular eradicated any urge to merriment—it wiped the smile off her face and sent her inner temperature plummeting towards absolute zero.

Goddamn it all to hell, she thought; the son of a bitch was early.

Then she heard a little of what he was saying and realized that it was even worse than that. The jerk actually thought he was right on time.

Rowan managed to intercept Wimmer and the soldiers escorting him before they reached the room where Jason was being held.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him, trying without success to keep her voice neutral.

Wimmer lifted his chin and peered at her through his glasses as if looking down on her from a great height (which, in his mind, he was). "What do you think I'm doing?" he said, contempt coating his phony pear-shaped tones. "I'm taking the specimen."

"But you can't," Rowan said, glancing at the soldiers around him. None of them would meet her eye. "I haven't prepared the cryostasis chamber yet."

The great man actually sneered at her. "I don't want him frozen, doctor. I want him soft."

Soft? As in alive? Was the son of a bitch really that crazy? Rowan shook her head firmly. "We've already discussed this..."

Wimmer's sneer deepened into a contemptuous smile. "Yes, well, I went over your head. I have the army's permission to remove the specimen to our Scranton facility." He made a vague gesture at the soldiers, as if these were the very men who had made the decision.

"But Dr Wimmer, you can't do this!" Rowan said. She looked at the soldiers again but they kept on staring straight ahead with stony expressions, showing no sign that they could even hear the conversation. "You can't risk transporting him through open country!"

Wimmer let out a bored breath that wasn't quite a sigh. "You have to see the bigger picture here," he told her.

"I've seen it!" she replied hotly. "Or should I remind you of the last time you tried to move him?"

"We've come a long way since then," Wimmer said airily, making another vague gesture at his escort.

Sensing he was about to move past her, Rowan stepped directly in front of him, blocking his path. "No, Dr Wimmer, I'm telling you..."

"Look, this isn't open for discussion," the jerk said, talking over her. "His unique ability to regenerate lost and damaged tissue, even to defy death simply calls for more research."

More research. That made it sound so controlled and neat and clean, practically antiseptic. Rowan shook her head. "You're willing

to risk the deaths of innocent civilians if he escapes."

She expected him to give her some bullshit about how the security arrangements were so advanced that there was absolutely no chance of Jason Voorhees escaping. Instead, he simply looked at her and said, "Yes," in a matter-of-fact tone that suggested he was surprised that she even had to ask. "No one is truly innocent," he added, pausing for half a second to make sure she could see that her shocked reaction didn't impress him before he continued. "Besides, I'm sure that Sergeant Marcus and his men can handle the transfer. Right, sergeant?" He gave the man on his left a sly, sideways look.

"Don't worry, ma'am," the sergeant said on cue. "He so much as twitches, I'll blow him right into tomorrow-morrow land."

Rowan thought the man's voice sounded too pat, as if the words had been fed to him and over-rehearsed. "Dr Wimmer, please—"

He talked over her again with a clear edge of annoyance. "You've done good work on this project, Rowan, but you are no longer needed here." He turned away from her to his right. "Sergeant?"

The sergeant looked over his shoulder at his men. "All right, let's move him out."

Rowan was still trying to protest as Wimmer brushed her aside. Furious at being so powerless before the asshole, she stared after him and the group of soldiers as they headed for the room where Jason was kept. Wimmer probably expected her to trot along after them but she couldn't bring herself to do that. If she couldn't put a stop to this idiocy, she certainly wasn't going to watch.

Christ, what a pain in the ass that girl was, Wimmer thought as he watched the soldiers spread out to surround the platform where the famous Jason Voorhees waited in chains. Someone had thrown a blanket over him; God only knew why. Maybe the spunky girl scientist was afraid the poor boogeyman was going to catch a cold.

And she thought she knew best. That was what really killed him. That little girl actually thought she had to instruct him. Him. Aloysius Bartholomew Wimmer, future Nobel laureate, eclipser of both Einstein and Hawking (no doubt in him on that score, either). And he was seriously supposed to entertain the idea of that little nobody giving him orders? Not in this lifetime, not her, not anyone,

not even Marcus or any of these soldiers, all of whom obviously knew more about what they were doing than that silly girl knew. Period. You could tell by the way they handled their weapons. And they had certainly come equipped; cattle prods, billy clubs, long metal noose poles with loops slip-knotted on the end. They were all exceptionally big guys, too, none under six-two and all of them beefy.

"Careful with that 50, soldier," Wimmer heard the sergeant say and looked over to see him rapping on the wall of the pillbox near the snout of the machine gun. "You've got friendlies out here."

Like the guy in the pillbox couldn't see that for himself, Wimmer thought impatiently, dabbing at the sweat that had suddenly popped out on his face. What the hell did they think they were doing, keeping the room so hot and covering that creature with a blanket? Had to be that girl's doing. What an idiot.

"What are you waiting for?" Wimmer demanded as the sergeant walked a slow, cautious circle around the monster.

"Just taking my time, doc," the sergeant said, unperturbed. "I only want to have to do this once." He looked around at the soldiers and then made a hand-signal. "All right, boys, let's knock him out."

Immediately, three guys with cattle prods lunged forward. The thing on the platform came to life with a series of frenzied, convulsive movements that continued until Marcus gave another hand-signal and the men stepped back.

Wimmer nodded in satisfaction as the thing went limp in its chains. So much for that big, bad bogeyman Jason Voorhees. You just had to know how to handle him, he thought as he stepped up to the platform and pulled the blanket off.

At first, he thought that pain-in-the-ass girl scientist had removed the hockey mask as a childish prank, either to gross him out or annoy him or both. It flashed through his mind exactly how he was going to rip her a new one, no, half a dozen new ones at the very least. And after that he would fix it so that she wouldn't even be able to get a job washing test tubes.

Then he heard Sergeant Marcus's voice somewhere off to one side saying, "What the Christ?" and the figure in front of him snapped into sharp focus.

The young soldier had not simply been strangled. The chain around his neck had crushed the flesh, bone and cartilage into a gory pulp that was now dribbling out onto his uniform. It had happened

quickly but judging from his ghastly blue, swollen face, not quick enough to spare him from excruciating agony.

"It can't be!" Wimmer said, unaware that he was speaking aloud and dropped the blanket.

He turned to Marcus who was looking around wildly, signaling his men to draw their weapons and spread out. One of them started towards the pillbox and then stopped short with a look of horrified disbelief.

Wimmer knew what he would see if he followed the soldier's gaze. He didn't want to see it—his mind was screaming at him to run for his life without looking at anything, but he couldn't help it. It was impossible not to turn around and see Jason Voorhees stepping out from behind the pillbox.

The heavy canvas straitjacket had split at the seams as if it were as flimsy as a trick tear-away coat in a comedy sketch and for an absurd moment, Wimmer found himself wondering why the creature hadn't just torn the whole thing off. Maybe he couldn't get the sleeves past the broken chains hanging off his wrists, his mind gibbered hysterically. Then Jason raised the massive machine gun from the pillbox in one hand and all coherent thought ceased.

"Oh, shit," said Marcus from somewhere else in the room.

Frozen to the spot, Wimmer waited for a burst of machine-gun fire to sweep the room and cut him in half. That would be a lot quicker and a lot less painful than what that poor bastard on the pedestal had suffered, but when the barrel of the gun did move, it collided with the skull of a nearby soldier hard enough to cave the bone in, splattering blood and tissue into the air.

Abruptly, the rest of the soldiers opened fire. Wimmer could see the monster's body jerk slightly as the barrage hit him but they might have been firing BB guns at him for all that it mattered. Jason advanced on them and grabbed up the nearest man, using him as a human shield. The other soldiers kept firing, some of them sparing a few rounds to blow the man's head off and bring a quick end to his suffering. Because these were good soldiers, combat soldiers who always knew what to do, Wimmer's mind babbled. His thoughts were racing. Good soldiers, yes; no doubt they wouldn't hesitate to do the same for him. They'd blow his head off, too, even though he was a civilian.

Jason dropped the bloody, torn-up body and moved forward, raising both arms and whipping the broken chains into the air. The whirring noise sent Wimmer's nerves into overdrive but he still couldn't run, couldn't move, couldn't even stagger back a step, could not even fall down, God help him.

God help him? That was a joke. God had left the building and was currently hightailing it for safer territory as far from here as possible. One of the chains wrapped itself around a soldier's neck, and in spite of the gunfire, the yelling and Wimmer's own hysterical mental screaming, he had no trouble hearing with perfect clarity the sound of the soldier's neck breaking. Abruptly, Jason snapped the other chain like a whip and Wimmer saw the end make a direct and very bloody hit against the side of Sergeant Marcus's head.

It is time to go now. The thought seemed to overwhelm the roaring, screeching panic in Wimmer's head, damping it down. The pandemonium outside his head seemed to damp down as well and even though he was still scared absolutely shitless, he was also starting to feel like he wasn't quite so frozen. Any second now, he'd be able to run right out of here.

He then almost fell over as a soldier brushed past him on his right, brandishing a noose pole. Before he could even get the loop centered over the monster, the thing snatched it out of the soldier's grasp and used the end to crack his forehead open. The sound of the bone shattering was followed immediately by the whirring of chains and the sickening crackle of another soldier's neck breaking.

It is time to go NOW.

Wimmer was on the move almost before he realized that his body had finally unfrozen. He could see a door down at the other end of the enormous room, past all those ugly, pretentious pillars. It wasn't the way he had come in and he could see one of those danger-yellow signs forbidding entry to unauthorized personnel but screw that, he was going through, and if the plucky little pain-in-the-ass girl had a problem with that, screw her!

He gasped as something struck him an intensely forceful, concentrated blow from behind. The monster had whipped that chain at him, he thought, caught him with the end, like a metal fist punching his spine and, oh God, his spine, was that why his legs suddenly wouldn't work? He looked down at himself.

The three-foot length of metal pole he found sticking out of his midsection was incomprehensible. Obviously this was some mistake, Wimmer thought, staring at it. Then he noticed that the metal was covered with blood and viscera, which also happened to be leaking from his abdomen. He took hold of the pole with both hands, still not understanding, and replayed the last few seconds in his head.

Memory delivered the painful sensation of a thin, red-hot something running him through back to front. All right, now he understood, Wimmer thought, still clutching the pole with both hands. Then memory caught up to real time and he sank to his knees as agony spread through him.

For some unmeasured and excruciating interval he wavered, trying to find the strength to stay upright and get back on his feet so he could make it all the way to the door down at the other end of the room. There was gunfire going off somewhere behind him, which had to mean there was still a chance that the monster would be subdued again. Jason would go down and he would survive after all. He just had to regain his balance and not fall over, especially not forward, not with this thing in his gut, if that happened he was screwed—

But he was already falling forward, he could feel it happening even before his body began to tilt.

The impact of the end of the pole against the floor sent a renewed firestorm of agony through him. This must be what a butterfly feels like with a pin through it, he thought, staring down at the floor.

He waited to feel himself slide down the pole and hit the floor with his face but nothing happened. He was still wondering what could have been holding him up at such an impossible angle when he died.

Rowan stared down at the contents of the cardboard box with an edginess she had been unsuccessfully trying to convince herself she no longer needed to feel. After her encounter with Wimmer, she had been too wound up to go back to her office and simply wait for him to pick up the paperwork on his way out. Instead, she had come here to the evidence room thinking she could burn off her nervous energy in a constructive way by gathering up all the bits and pieces they had collected on Jason Voorhees—newspaper clippings, copies of police

reports, crime scene photos, a pair of work gloves stiff with long-dried blood, along with a lot of other things she didn't care to look at. Chief among them was the infamous machete, which she had put in first and buried under everything else. She couldn't stand the sight of that thing, had barely been able to bring herself to touch it, and even though it was completely hidden, the force of its presence was undiminished, as if it were an evil battery fully charged by two decades of bloody mayhem and murder.

Someone had insisted on keeping all of Voorhees's belongings as research material. Rowan had no idea who that had been but she suspected the real reason had less to do with research than it did with plain old morbid fascination.

Well, that was nothing special and she would be dishonest if she didn't own up to having been morbidly fascinated by a few things herself in the past. But not by anything having to do with Jason Voorhees, never that. In Rowan's view, the only people who could possibly feel any morbid fascination about Jason were those who hadn't had the misfortune to be in the same room with him.

Except for Dr Wimmer. That creep only seemed to become more fascinated every time he had returned to the facility. Rowan had begun to suspect that some of his previous visits had been completely unnecessary, that he had just wanted to stare at the monster. When he had finally been granted authorization to remove Jason to his own lab the expression on his face had been positively salacious. And today when she had confronted him in the hallway, now that she thought about it, he had looked as if he were having a little difficulty keeping his excitement under control. Hadn't that been drops of sweat gleaming on his upper lip?

It would be just like Wimmer to get aroused by being in the same room with a detail of heavily armed soldiers and a homicidal maniac. Oh God, too gross! A wave of nausea swept through her and for a moment she thought that she might actually throw up. Appropriately enough, right into the cardboard box on the desk in front of her, all over the stuff that some of her colleagues insisted on referring to as Jasonaphernalia. As if it were some sort of legitimate area of study and not evidence of a series of atrocities stretching back two decades.

At least the soldiers would be handling the hard parts. After all the time she had put in at the Crystal Lake Facility, she had come to know a great deal about soldiers. The guys in the detail Wimmer had

arrived with all had the look of no-nonsense veterans, including the sergeant, in spite of his pat answer. If Wimmer was clueless as to what he was dealing with, they weren't.

However, having seen firsthand what Jason was capable of, she could not bring herself to feel even slightly reassured. All at once, she realized with a sharp surge of dismay that the much-longed-for good night's sleep she had been telling herself she could look forward to once Jason Voorhees had been transported out of here wasn't going to happen after all. To know that the monster would be in Wimmer's custody was only fodder for more nightmares along with the ones she was already having.

It came to her then as a further realization that the problem wasn't merely Wimmer. While she most certainly didn't want to keep Jason Voorhees at the Crystal Lake Facility, she would have felt no better regardless of who took possession of him. No matter where she was, awake or asleep, she would never know a moment's peace or draw an easy breath as long as Jason Voorhees was on the face of the earth.

But if she could not destroy the monster itself, she could destroy the detritus that had been left in its wake and now served as reminders of its savagery and ugliness. When she dumped this crap in the incinerator, it would be like she was burning up her nightmares, if not all of them, then at least the worst of them. If she could not put an end to Jason, she would settle for putting an end to the pornography of evil known as Jasonaphernalia. She picked up the cardboard box and stepped out into the hall.

The soldier was a good thirty feet down the hallway almost before Rowan felt the material of his uniform graze her arm as he brushed past her. By the time she realized he was one of the guys in Wimmer's detail, he had disappeared around the corner. She turned to look in the direction from which he had come and narrowly missed being run over by a second soldier from the same detail. He didn't stop or even slow down but she could see the utter terror in his face as clearly as she had ever seen anything.

"Oh, shit..." For a moment, she could only stand there with the box in her hands and stare after him while a hard icy knot of fear gathered painfully in the pit of her stomach. She looked down at the box she was carrying and suddenly the idea flitted through her mind that all this could have been prevented if she had had the foresight to

dump this Jasonaphernalia in the incinerator as soon as the monster had been chained.

But that was completely absurd, of course. Total nonsense. The last thing she should have been worrying about was dumping anything in the incinerator, she had to... The box flew up out of her hands and bits of so-called Jasonaphernalia scattered everywhere as she hit the floor hard. The man who had bumped into her stumbled, regained his feet, and kept going all in a matter of seconds, never looking back. She started to call out to him when the air was filled with the deafening noise of machine gun fire. As loud as it was, it wasn't loud enough to drown out the screams.

Rowan pushed herself to her feet and without really knowing what she was doing, took a step towards the room where Jason was being kept. Abruptly, the door exploded outward and she saw a man flying through the air backwards. He landed almost at her feet. It was Sergeant Marcus, blood pouring thickly from his mouth. Rowan knelt beside him and automatically began trying to help him up.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed at her in a raw, agonized voice. "Get out now!"

"What happened?" she heard herself asking him, already knowing the answer.

"He's escaped..." his words cut off. One last gush of blood poured out of his mouth and with it Rowan felt his life pour out of him as well.

"Damn it. Wimmer!" As she grabbed up the sergeant's shotgun, she hoped sincerely and unrepentantly that Jason had treated that asshole to an equally ugly end. Death by Jason Voorhees was something she wouldn't have wished on anyone, no matter who they were—or so she had thought. And now here she was with a shotgun in her hands, practically hoping Jason had put Wimmer through some changes while she locked and loaded.

Fine. The first free moment she had, she would put facing her moral and ethical crisis as number one on her Things-To-Do list. Right now, however, she had her hands full.

She ran up the hall, taking care to leap high over the machete now lying on the floor in plain sight.

The only thing to do, Rowan decided as she pounded down a flight of metal stairs to the underground cryo area, was to lure the son of a bitch to the cryostasis chamber, trap him inside and freeze his ass permanently. In light of the fact that her specialty was life-science research and not strategies for monster killing, it was a pretty good plan. But it did have two rather enormous drawbacks. Firstly, it involved luring Jason using herself as bait, and secondly she hadn't worked out a foolproof way to trap the monster in the chamber without trapping herself. Jason Voorhees wasn't going to run loose again if she could possibly help it, but sacrificing her own life was not an option she was ready to consider. Not yet, anyway.

As if anyone else Jason killed ever had, whispered a small voice in her mind. Rowan shoved the thought away as she looked around the mostly-dark cryo lab for a place to hide; survive now, be neurotic later. With all the enormous tanks and ducts and pipes that fed into the cryo chamber, this area had always looked to her like a cross between a Gothic dungeon and a refrigerator conceived by a mad scientist with a technology fetish. What a place to have to hide in

The heavy door of the cryo chamber was open and waiting. Rowan moved towards it but then her gaze fell on a rack of gas canisters across the room just as she heard those heavy footsteps start down the stairs. A hiding place with a much better vantage point; she would be able to see exactly where Jason was without him seeing her. Clutching the sergeant's shotgun in both hands, she crouched behind it, trying not to shiver too violently while she listened to the monster's approaching footsteps, each one louder than the last. The cryo lab was always at least ten degrees cooler than the rest of the facility and often more like fifteen, sometimes as much as twenty, even when the chamber wasn't in use. The way she felt now, it seemed like a miracle that the clammy sweat from her hands hadn't turned into ice.

The footsteps hit the bottom of the staircase and stopped. Rowan's breathing stopped at the very same moment while her heart banged on harder than ever. Unaware that she was holding her breath, she pressed one hand against her chest thinking that it might subdue her heart rate, but it only made her shudder even more. That was bad. She had to get herself under control. She had to remain perfectly and utterly still, as still as a statue because the monster was standing in the middle of the lab not even ten feet away and if she made even the

slightest, faintest noise, he would hear it and know exactly where she was.

That was assuming the bat-ears theory was correct, of course. Dr Charles had said it was certainly worthy of investigation although she had told Rowan in private that although Jason probably did have a predator's highly developed hearing, there was a lot more to it than that. The frenzy of Jason's slaughter suggested to her that a more visceral-level stimulus was at work; which was to say, smell. It could have been sweat or pheromones or even blood. Or maybe something else either produced by the human body or just closely associated with it, or some combination thereof. In any case, if Jason could smell his prey, it would be impossible for anyone to hide.

Was that what he was doing as he stood in the center of the lab now? Trying to smell whether she was in the room or not? There wasn't much light and most of that was behind him so she saw him only in silhouette. His posture didn't seem to suggest that he was sniffing the air but Jason Voorhees had never been long on body language. As far as Rowan knew, he had four attitudes. One when about to kill; a second when killing; a third when looking to kill again; and another when rising from the dead, none of them subtle or open to interpretation and all virtually identical. The only real difference was in the eye of the beholder—which was to say, whether the eye was still in the beholder.

Rowan pressed her lips together to stifle the hysteria she could feel rising in her chest like turbulent cold water. The monster had stopped to pick up his machete, she saw, and it was already dripping again. She had a mental image of it lying on the floor when she had jumped over it. Maybe that had been a mistake. Maybe she should have picked that up along with the sergeant's shotgun. Maybe then she would be crouching in the dark knowing she actually had a chance. Maybe the only way to kill the monster was with his own weapon.

His head turned slowly from one side to the other and back again, as if the monster were not only scanning the room but trying to make a careful estimate of its dimensions. As if there was something behind that hockey mask other than the unrelenting drive to kill.

She saw his hand tighten on the handle of the machete and knew that he had found her. Now or never, there was no going back.

Shutting off all thought in her mind, she jumped to her feet and started blasting

The first one caught him squarely in the center of the body, in the back, she saw to her surprise. But when had he had time to turn around? She could wonder later, she thought, and lowered her aim. He'd have a hard time chasing her if she shot his legs off...

His leg jerked as she caught him in the knee but he didn't fall. All right then, she would take the easy way out, just blow his head off and call it a day. But her hands had started to shake so badly that she only blasted a chunk out of his shoulder instead. The impact knocked him back a step but he still didn't fall.

Still firing, she sidled out from behind the rack but he moved with her and she knew that he wasn't about to let her drive him back so she could get anywhere near those stairs. She kept moving anyway—no point in just standing there until the ammo ran out—and then felt her hip bump up against something hard and metal. She glanced down to find herself crowded up against another rack of canisters, a smaller one on wheels.

The idea came to her not in words or even a sequence of images but as one sweeping action, fully formed, utterly flawless. Her heart gave a sharp leap of excitement as she stepped back and shoved the rack hard with one foot. It zoomed forward and slammed into Jason's lower body. He stared down at it for a second in what Rowan would have sworn was genuine surprise. When he raised his head to look at her, there was a slight quizzical tilt to it.

Well, wasn't that amazing? Jason Voorhees had previously four known expressive postures. He now had a fifth: the presence of higher-brain activity. Maybe she should write a paper, she thought as she took careful aim at the canisters and pulled the trigger

The canisters did not explode in a fiery blast and cover the monster with flame as she had hoped. Her shot had gone wide of the mark, only grazing some of the tanks on top of the rack and punching a few small holes in them. But the gas spewed out from them forcefully enough to knock Jason back several steps towards the open cryo-unit behind him.

Quickly, Rowan raised the shotgun again and blasted him several more times, keeping him offbalance so that he kept staggering backwards right into the cryo chamber. All the lights were on inside and she could see every detail of him clearly: all the bullet holes,

fresh spatters of blood from the people he had killed, the thick, brackish substance leaking from wounds. The machete in his misshapen fist. And that hockey mask, scarred and cut, scraped and dented, and forever impassive, implacable and impossible to stop.

Oh, yeah?

With a sound like a war cry, Rowan hurled herself at the cryo-unit door and slammed it shut.

Immediately, Jason's head appeared in the thick glass window. She could feel as well as hear him on the other side of the door, trying to pound his way out. To get at her, she realized, as much in rage as in bloodlust. She had gotten the upper hand and the killing machine was taking it personally. Further evidence of possible higher brain function? Or just a matter of predatory instinct, in other words, first kill the immediate threat, then kill everything else? Like it really matters right now?

The PA system crackled. "Cryo-unit sealed," announced a calm female voice and Rowan almost jumped out of her skin. "Please initiate activation sequence."

Jason bashed the door of the unit hard enough to make Rowan jump again.

It's not going to hold him, said a small, eerily calm voice in her mind. Nothing ever has and nothing ever will because nothing can. You know how this works. You knew it when you shut him in there.

The calm computer voice was making another polite request for her to initiate the activation sequence when she slammed her fist against a large green button on the side of the unit. There was a loud hum as the freezing system came to life. "Cryounit activated," the voice said matter-of-factly.

No shit, Rowan thought, barely able to stay on her feet now. She refused to give in to the urge to go limp with relief until she saw with her own eyes that Jason was completely and solidly frozen. Only then would she allow herself to rest. But just for a few minutes. She had to pull herself together and make sure that nobody ever came down here and thawed him out again, and if that meant she had to guard the cryounit personally twenty-four seven for the next five hundred years, then those were the breaks. But this was the end. As of this moment, Jason Voorhees had been permanently wiped off the face of the earth.

Rowan moved around to the door and peered through the window. The hockey mask looked back at her and she could see Jason's shoulders rising and falling with the effort of breathing.

Freeze, you bastard, she told him silently as ice crystals formed on his filthy clothes and twinkled prettily, incongruous stars. Freeze over like the hell where you belong.

She saw him take a deep, extra-effortful breath. Then his arm jerked forward and he punched her in the stomach.

That was what it felt like at first, anyway, as if he had managed to drive his fist all the way through the door right into her stomach. Then she felt a sharp, terrible pain that was somehow both ice-cold and burning-hot at the same time and she knew that it had nothing to do with being punched.

Rowan pushed herself back and felt her midsection sliding off the blade of the machete, which was protruding bloodily from the thick metal door. How the hell did he do that, she wondered, pressing her hands against the wound as she took several stiff little steps backwards. How could he slice through that thick metal door as if it were nothing more than soft cheese?

The hockey mask watched her through the glass that was rapidly icing over even as a blast of frosty air vented through the slit where Jason's machete had been. He had removed it, Rowan saw, and now he was raising it high, preparing to chop his way out of the cryo unit and finish her off.

Except he didn't. Instead, he seemed to pause, one arm up and Rowan wondered what he was waiting for. Maybe for all those alarms she had only just now become aware of to stop.

"Cryo-unit breach," said the computer voice, as calm as ever. "Lock-down in progress."

Lock-down. The fog Rowan's mind had been sinking into suddenly dispersed and she was fully alert again

"No!" She turned away from the cryo-unit just in time to see the lab door swing shut. There was a harsh hissing as the seals activated, making the room airtight.

"No..." she repeated but only a faint wheeze came out of her. She turned back to look at the cryo-unit. Through the window, she had one last glimpse of Jason still in the same position, machete raised for a blow he was never going to strike, before the glass iced over and the cryo gas began to build up in the lab.

The air was cold enough to make breathing painful now, or perhaps that was due to the stab wound she had suffered. Or not—both the pain in her lungs and the pain in her stomach seemed to be lessening, actually becoming more distant. Just like Jason Voorhees himself.

She felt her back hit the wall and fell to her knees, holding her middle. "No... Please..." she whispered, unsure of whom she was actually trying to address, no one or the universe in general or perhaps just herself and Jason together. No, please. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. This wasn't what I had in mind.

The blood around her wound was turning into ice crystals. So were her tears. She found herself on her knees, beginning to sag sideways as she collapsed slowly to the floor. No, this wasn't how it was supposed to go but this is how it is going and there's no going back. The decision of the judges is final; all sales are final; last call; game over.

Underneath the continued hissing of cryo gas, a deep and impenetrable silence was building, or so it seemed to Rowan. A memory of something she had read about an expedition to the South Pole floated dreamily through her mind, something about how freezing to death was actually quite an easy way to go, quite painless. You just fell asleep.

That was definitely better than the ending Jason's victims had faced, Rowan thought. And she had almost been one of them but circumstance or fate or something had intervened and instead of having to bleed to death from a painful stomach wound, she was going to doze off gently into a state of eternal rest.

She smiled inwardly. Even if things hadn't gone quite how they were supposed to, at least she would finally be able to rest easy now that she knew the monster no longer roamed the earth. A world without Jason Voorhees was a world that could only get better.

THREE

Sadly, even without Jason Voorhees things continued to go downhill for the world. As much of a horror as Jason had been, he had been a localized horror. Whether or not the monster that was Jason Voorhees walked the earth made absolutely no difference when it came to politics, the global deterioration of the ecosystem, or the perennial problems of war, famine, and pestilence.

When Dr Wimmer failed to return to Scranton and all communication with Crystal Lake went unanswered, a military unit was dispatched to investigate. They found the Crystal Lake facility still in lockdown but were able to access the surveillance records, which told the whole gory tale in full, vivid detail. Since the problem was obviously contained, central command instructed the soldiers to leave bad enough alone. There were other more pressing crises to deal with in 2010 AD—food riots were still going on in urban areas all over the country despite the declaration of martial law. International relations worsened; Canada closed its borders and tripled the number of armed guards, ordering them to repel all global warming refugees by any means necessary, including the use of deadly force.

The equatorial regions in South America, Africa, and Asia roasted, charred, died and continued to roast unchecked. The dead area spread with terrifying swiftness, affirming the flames that carried it. The oceans died even faster and poison rained from the sky. By then, the surviving population had managed to transfer itself to orbiting biospheres as the human race prepared to embark on a serious search for a new home planet.

A hundred years after Rowan LaFontaine had slipped into the dreamless peace of cryogenic stasis, humanity finally made that long-awaited first contact with a race of intelligent extraterrestrials that were capable of interstellar travel. Communication between the two species was difficult; it took many hours to convey a message or to receive one, and the outcome wasn't always entirely successful. But somehow, humanity managed to acquire what it called the hyper-drive in a trade for a pod of dolphins, two acres' worth of mature *Cannabis sativa* plants, and a dozen human corpses, cryogenically frozen after death. There were six male and six female corpses, none

of them from the Crystal Lake Research facility. Rowan LaFontaine and Jason Voorhees, long forgotten, remained undiscovered

While the aliens may have been hard to understand, the hyper-drive, amazingly, was not. The human race simply attached the technology to their biospheres like sophisticated outboard motors, strapped down all the loose breakables, and put the pedal to the metal.

Finding a habitable planet wasn't difficult, either. Finding one that they all agreed would be Earth II, however, was a different story. Certain of the biospheres didn't want an Earth II, claiming they had no desire to re-create the mistakes of the past while others could hardly wait to get started. In the end, some stayed and some moved on to settle elsewhere.

Finally, after a prolonged period of breaks in continuity and inconsistent progress, the flow of human history resumed. Three and a half centuries went by.

"A survey of Earth I before, during, and after the third millennium in the Western Hemisphere" was, despite its rather uninspired title, the most popular course at New Harvard. The one located in Amherst, NH, that was, which was the only one of the six New Harvard campuses that offered it. NH stood for Northern Hemisphere, of course, but the more tuned-in and alert students knew they could score extra points with Professor Lowe by saying New Hampshire and demonstrating that they knew the original Amherst had been the name of a town there, as well as in another area called Massachusetts.

It was Braithwaite Lowe's contention that he could trace both sides of his family all the way back to the mid-twentieth century on Earth I. According to him, most of his forebears had been landowners in the area called New England (not to be confused with Old England, part of an island network located in Earth I's Eastern Hemisphere just south of the Scandinavian Leaping Tiger). He never bothered to mention that the said forebears had had no connection to the original Harvard, not that anybody ever thought to ask. The cachet of the original Harvard was lost on most Earth II inhabitants unless

they were seriously long-lived or extremely knowledgeable about certain areas of Pre-Evacuation Civilization.

The Prevac as a whole was, of course, far too enormous a subject for any one person to study. The documentation was so extensive that it was housed on the next world out from Earth II, where the rigorously indexed archive and its robot custodians took up the entire planet and both its moons. As had always been the case with human beings, interest in other eras and cultures came and went in trends, some lasting longer than others.

Academia was not immune. That Professor Lowe's course had not ended up in the academic morgue with a tag on its toe that said *passé* after three semesters was partly a tribute to his political acumen and partly down to good luck with his timing. He had proposed the course while a close friend was in charge of approving changes and additions to the curriculum. The friend happened to owe him a favor in circumstances that all but amounted to blackmail. Lowe was, of course, wise enough to refrain from making even the most veiled allusion to this, but the old friend (who knew exactly what Lowe was doing) approved the entire package, budget and all, with an enthusiasm so intense that he sustained a mild hernia.

But even that degree of support alone would not have been enough to save the course from the scrap heap. It was just Professor Lowe's sheer good fortune to have dreamed up a course that suddenly and without warning took off in popularity to become the kind of runaway hit that confers an ineffable and permanent prestige on everything and everyone associated with it. In the space of an academic year, Braithwaite Lowe went from being a slightly better-than-average lecturer trying to distinguish himself and increase his enrolment numbers to a bona fide celebrity scholar and sought-after expert with not only his own office, but also his own building and full-time staff of paid employees and student interns, as well as priority status for virtually all requests or requisitions. He also acquired a wealth of new best friends, including some he hadn't actually met and if he so desired, a different partner in bed every night for the foreseeable future. And, needless to say, tenure.

Most people in higher education, especially those at New Harvard, had been sure it wouldn't last, chief among them being Lowe himself. But every semester saw an increase in applications for enrolment from students in a wide variety of disciplines. At the administration's

request, Lowe made the requirements for admission tougher, but that didn't seem to discourage most people. If anything, it only made places on the course even more sought-after. Increasing the amount and difficulty of the coursework had the same effect. Lowe decided he would just have to live with being an academic superstar as best he could

There had been other courses that involved offworld field trips, not only to Earth I but to other planets as well, and there still were, at New Harvard and elsewhere. But somehow, semester after semester and year after year, more and more students clamored to sign up. To go Lowe, so to speak.

If there was anything else at work in Lowe's success other than good luck, it was the fact that the professor had a genuine and quite profound affinity for the subject. This was apparent not just to the lucky students who got in but to anyone who had the opportunity to observe Lowe at work. The young ex-grunt code-named Kicker would have verified that, had he been allowed to comment, he had served in the bodyguard detail for Professor Lowe's field trips half a dozen times. He had to admit that the course was worth every bit of its exorbitant price tag; despite the fact that he thought a lot of the stuff that he had the students doing was some pretty silly-assed shit. For example, Lowe always insisted that the class had to dress and act in period as much as possible, which meant the kids would be running around dressed in weird get-ups and saying things like, "Who's your daddy?" or "Bling bling!" or "Get your groove on, dude."

Kicker was pretty sure he couldn't have brought himself to do anything like that just to get an A, especially from Lowe. But then, he didn't care much for the guy personally, as Geko had put it, when they were handing out smarm, Lowe thought they'd said charm and stood in line twice. Nor was he particularly thrilled at having to babysit a pack of silly, overgrown kids. However, the female students were always a pleasure to look at. Since Professor Smarm had his pick of the students, he picked carefully.

The current group included some pretty respectable talent. As always, Kicker made sure he kept his distance; the last thing he wanted was to get CUBO'ed by Lowe. Lowe wouldn't hesitate to do it,

either; he'd written up guys for conduct unbecoming official duty on more than one occasion, usually because he thought they might be giving him some competition for the ladies' attention, according to the rumor mill.

Still, Kicker had been hoping that the tall blonde lab assistant was making the trip down to the surface with the rest of them this time around. She had been on the last two field trips as Lowe's paid staff and although he hadn't had much chance to spend a whole lot of time in her company, he could definitely tell she was noticing him the same way he was noticing her.

Of course, he wasn't supposed to be fraternizing with anyone on the staff, either, but the risk factor was a lot lower with staff who were considered less vulnerable. If the sarge caught him sniffing around the blonde lab assistant, the most he might do was rip him a new one. But anyone stupid enough to try putting the moves on a student could end up facing a court-martial, even an ex-grunt with a spotless record. If there were any students worth that kind of shitstorm, Kicker had yet to meet them.

Exactly what it meant, then, was that he was willing to risk his life but not his career for these nubile hard-bodies. This wasn't something he usually bothered to think about. In fact, the only thing he was supposed to be thinking about now was what might be waiting for them at the bottom of the staircase in this subterranean compound he had just broken them into on Lowe's orders. He had given up telling Lowe to stay further back and keep his students with him; Professor Smarm and the kids were right on his heels. Only their air filtration masks kept him from feeling their collective breathing down his neck.

Kicker had tried to impress on them that he couldn't protect them too well unless they stayed further behind him and for their part, they would listen, understand, and do whatever the hell they wanted. Even Professor Smarm, who should have known better. But then the man had been on a lot more Earth I expeditions than Kicker or even Sergeant Brodski, and he hadn't come up against anything more threatening than the crap environment and the barely-breathable air. For the last couple of centuries, there hadn't been any life on the planet other than a few varieties of bug that survived by eating each other and, contrary to all those corny old movies Lowe was so fond of showing his students, none of the insects had mutated into fifty-foot

fire-breathing monsters; the largest ones Kicker had ever seen were about the size of his thumbnail. Not that he had seen many; they seemed to have an aversion to humans. Geko had suggested it was racial memory, a knowledge of what humans had done to Earth I etched into their buggy little cells.

Too bad Geko had stayed on the *Grendel* instead of coming along, Kicker thought, trying to wave Lowe and his students further back as he crept down the stairs, keeping his weapon up and ready. He could have used her sense of humor as well as her help. But Brodski had decided one guard was enough. This site was the last stop on the tour before they headed back to Earth II and Lowe was only taking three students in for a look around. These were supposedly the three that he considered to be the most intelligent, if the whispers he had overheard were as true as they were envious.

Since all the students were supposed to be somewhere on the sunny side of genuine genius, Kicker couldn't see the point of having any further distinctions unless Lowe wanted to make them even more competitive than they already were. Maybe that was how Professor Smarm got his rocks off, watching them all jockey for position, or rather one of the ways he got his rocks off. If there was a no fraternization rule for professors at New Harvard, Kicker knew for a fact that Braithwaite Lowe wasn't troubled by it.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and held up one hand, signaling the rest of them to stop while he had a look around. Christ, air was not only still circulating down here but it was also still being processed. Amazing. This was one of those places designed to survive pretty much anything short of the whole planet being vaporized. It had to date back to one of those scary periods, either the Cold War or later on at the turn of the century, when terrorism was on the rise (after half a dozen tours as a glorified babysitter, Kicker had not failed to learn almost as much as the paying customers). There weren't many structures of that type and Kicker had never expected to see one except as a holographic reproduction. But here he was, actually standing inside the real thing, breathing air that was centuries old.

He heard someone coming down the stairs to join him and he turned to find Kay-Em on his left, looking alert and matter-of-fact, as always. Kicker gave her a small nod. If he couldn't have Geko with him, Kay-Em was an acceptable substitute. He had had his doubts

about her at first. They all had, especially the sarge, but she had showed them almost immediately that there was nothing to worry about

Now she stood very still, her head turning slowly as she gave the area a thorough once-over. He had already spotted the big metal door several feet ahead of them and he was pretty sure Kay-Em would suggest they check that out first but he didn't mind waiting for her to give the okay. Only he was hoping that would be sooner rather than later; all of a sudden, he was starting to feel damned chilly.

Abruptly, Kay-Em went over to the door and scrubbed at something with one hand. She stepped back and Kicker saw it was a tiny window. He went over to take a closer look and realized right away that this was where the cold was coming from. Giant freezer on the other side, full of very old groceries? The only thing he could see through the window besides frost was the glow from some kind of light source. Guess the refrigerator lights didn't always go out in the old days, he thought.

He turned to Kay-Em intending to ask her something, but she was busy with an array of controls on a panel next to the door. Abruptly, there was a loud hum followed by the sound of large metal gears put into motion after ages of inactivity, and then a cracking sound, like an iceberg breaking.

As the cracking grew louder, Kicker felt the floor vibrating under his feet and he braced himself, thinking it might be an earth tremor or a quake. There was a long, drawn-out metallic groan and then the door was swinging open. Automatically, Kicker stepped back, raising his weapon while Kay-Em calmly positioned herself in front of him but well out of his line of fire.

"Everyone stay put," Lowe called out from the staircase, somewhat needlessly, considering that none of the students was stupid enough to rush down trying to be first to go through. Kicker figured it was some kind of professor thing. "Kay-Em?"

Thick fog rolled out of the doorway as the temperature where they were dropped at least another ten degrees in almost as many seconds. Kay-Em stood perfectly still, letting it billow around her while she took some readings with her equipment.

"No viruses, no bacteria, no toxins," she said finally. "It's clean." She looked over her shoulder at Kicker and then walked through the

open doorway. He followed, keeping his weapon raised and hoping his fingers wouldn't be too numb to work properly if he had to use it.

But there was nothing in the room except a lot of very old power conduits and equipment, much of which lay scattered and broken on the floor. Clearly there had been some kind of physical fight in here; Kicker had seen enough brawls to know what the aftermath looked like. Judging from the layers of ice crystals on everything, whatever had gone on here had happened only minutes or possibly even seconds before everything had frozen. Or, he thought uneasily, maybe even during.

Either way, there hadn't been any activity in this room since. Everything had remained just as the former occupants, whoever they were, had left it until Kay-Em had unlocked the door and let them in.

Good Christ, what a find. The professor was going to wet his pants. Kicker turned to give the all-clear to Lowe and the others but they were already coming in, loosening their protective outer clothing and removing their goggles and filter-masks.

"Amazing," Lowe said, wide-eyed with awe as he looked around. "It's still cold."

Kicker barely managed to restrain himself from asking the professor if he was sure about that as he moved into the best position for observing both the doorway and as much of the room as possible. As tempting as it was to get mouthy with Lowe, he wouldn't be doing himself any favors. Better to tell Brodski that Professor Smarm was really starting to get on his nerves so the sarge could rotate him out of the bodyguard detail and give him a break, let him stay on the mothership and handle equipment maintenance, which was what the rest of the unit was doing right now.

A small figure whose ill-fitting storm-coat dragged on the floor pushed past Lowe impatiently. Professor Smarm showed no reaction to this rudeness. He never did; not with this student anyway, Janessa something-or-other. Her parents were famous, mainly for being well-known lineage snobs but also because there were actually three of them rather than the customary two. Not a *ménage à trois*, but simply three people who had participated in a pioneering experiment to pool genetic material and produce offspring with more than two biological immediate parents. Janessa had been one of the first successful births to come out of the project and she had been riding her celebrity for all it was worth. Kicker couldn't blame her for that,

but he didn't much like her, either. He found her too stuck on herself and too heartless to refrain from flaunting her various advantages, one of them being Lowe's overly indulgent attitude towards her. She was genuinely bright, and from time to time Kicker wondered if that was why her fellow students hadn't killed her yet.

She ripped off her goggles and shook out her dark hair, looking around and wrinkling her nose with disgust. Since she had been to all the other sites, she had tried to get Lowe to let her sit this one out back on the Grendel but for once he wouldn't let her have her way. Consequently, her majesty had made sure that Lowe and everyone else understood that she was not amused. Not that it did her any good—Lowe and the other students didn't care and neither could Kay-Em, while Kicker himself was entertained.

Her Majesty's bad mood was also lost on the extremely skinny guy who stumbled in behind her. Azrael Benrubi was the youngest member of the class, a child prodigy who had recently turned seventeen. It was an age that he insisted made him too old to be a child anything, in keeping with the spirit of Dr Lowe's course, the Prodigy Formerly known As A Child was a more accurate and therefore more acceptable term. Kicker thought that was a hoot even before he'd had the reference explained to him.

But then, he was fond of the kid. All the exgrunts were, including Brodski, to the point where Azrael was practically the unit's unofficial mascot. Dallas in particular spent a lot of time playing virtual reality games with him down in the area near the cargo hold. Kicker himself had joined them a couple of times to hunt the big dinosaur-style beasts Azrael was so fond of designing, Dallas referred to them as Disgust-O-Sauruses, for their tendency to over-salivate.

Tsunaron came in almost a full five seconds after Janessa. He was doing that a lot lately, giving the girl a wide berth. Kicker couldn't really blame him for obvious reasons, but what puzzled him was that the kid didn't seem to have even a mild animal attraction to her. The tall, brainy student had not exactly been wild about the girl to begin with—Kicker had picked up on that immediately. Perhaps it was just a simple personality conflict. The kid saw himself as a serious scientist and disapproved of her because she was one of those pretty girls who knew she was hot and was only too happy to work that to her advantage.

But Kicker had noticed that over the last week, the kid had gone from just ignoring her to going out of his way to avoid her. Was she really getting on his nerves that much? Or was he just making sure that Lowe knew he didn't have the slightest interest in her? Seeing as how Lowe obviously did, it didn't take a genius to know that crowding Professor Smarm was the best way to fail the course.

Either explanation was reasonable, but Kicker couldn't get over the feeling that there was actually some other factor at work, something that had to do with Kay-Em, who showed a marked tendency to keep to within ten feet of Tsunaron whenever possible. Kicker was almost certain that nothing was going on there but judging from the body language—Tsunaron's, of course but surprisingly Kay-Em's as well—it was only a matter of time. Talk about kinky. It was too kinky even for Lowe, which gave Kay-Em the distinction of being the only good-looking female the professor wasn't interested in. Probably saved Tsunaron a lot of grief.

But not from Janessa What's-Her-Name. If Lowe didn't see Tsunaron as possible competition, Janessa didn't feel the same way about Kay-Em. Kicker got the definite impression that she didn't much like the idea of a man being more drawn to someone else than to her, even if she didn't actually want him. That was understandable, Kicker supposed, for a pampered, spoiled brat who was used to taking it for granted that she was the most desirable girl in the room, or on the planet.

What was really odd, however, was Kay-Em's attitude. Occasionally, he caught her looking at Janessa with an expression that, had he seen it on anyone else's face, he would have immediately identified as jealousy. But how Kay-Em could have been jealous—well, whatever that was all about, he didn't actually want to know. There was always some kind of weirdness going on where students were involved; in two months, the course would be over and he could forget about it.

Right now, however, things were really starting to get interesting, even more so than usual. Azrael was practically bouncing on tiptoe in front of some kind of storage unit that took up about a third of the room they were in, peering through a heavily-frosted porthole-style window.

"Look at this! I mean, check it out, check it out!" he said, looking around at everyone else, Kicker included. "Awesome! This is the real

deal, isn't it?" He turned a goofily hopeful gaze on the professor who nodded at him with approval.

"It certainly is," Lowe told him in a grandly authoritative teacher voice. "Now, someone tell me what you make of that, if anything?" He licked his lips and Kicker realized that the man was actually as excited as the kid, possibly even more.

"Well, it's some kind of, uh, big frozen storage container," Azrael said. "Right?"

Tsunaron joined him in front of it. "Probably a cryostasis unit," he said. "I'd guess an early Port series." He looked around. "Kay-Em?"

Kay-Em consulted her handheld unit. "Z-Port eleven, manufactured around twenty-ten. Precise historic records are inconsistent."

No one said anything for a moment. Then Tsunaron's face broke into a broad smile. "So, is anyone else thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Kicker," Lowe beckoned to him. "Open it up for us."

Kicker waved them all back as he went over to the unit and took a closer look at the controls on the outside. A cryostasis unit had been his guess as well except, like everyone else on Earth II, he had been taught back in primary school that cryostasis technology had not been perfected for regular use until after the people of Earth I had actually left the surface of the planet and emigrated to the orbiting habitats.

But here was hard evidence to the contrary, right in front of him. This was the find of the century and he had had the major stroke of luck to be in the party that discovered it. Oh, man, he thought as he searched for something that looked like a release for the door; what were the odds that babysitting duty would put him smack in the middle of a landmark moment in human history? Damn, this really was something. Did it mean that some people really had stayed behind and tried to survive underground? Or had everybody who had worked on this died before they could go public?

Next to the controls on the front of the unit, he found a button about the size of his palm and tried pressing it. Abruptly there was the sound of old machinery starting up after an extremely long period of inactivity and then a noise like an airtight seal loosening. Kicker took hold of something that might have been a handle covered in ice, braced his foot against the unit, and pulled.

There was a loud *whooooosh* and he found himself enveloped in a frigid cloud of fog and tiny ice crystals. Should have left his goggles on, he thought as he squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away, wincing under millions of incredibly sharp pinpricks. Behind him, Janessa Whoever made a fussy startled noise.

"What the hell is that?" she said.

"Humanoid," Kay-Em responded, taking a reading on it. "Organic composition unclear."

"My God," said Lowe. "He's a monster."

Kicker felt the ice crystals on his face turn to mist as he took a step back and wiped the excess moisture from his eyes so he could get a look at whatever had been locked up in the cryo-unit.

At first, he thought it was an attack dummy of the kind used in combat training. Had somebody managed to sneak down here ahead of them and plant it as a joke? Geko and Condor, maybe—it was just the kind of stunt they'd have pulled. But his mind rejected it even as it was occurring to him. Leaving aside the fact that attack dummies weren't dolls to be posed with a weapon held in one upraised hand, there was the matter of time. Even if the entire squad, Brodski included, had been in on it, they could not have set everything up this quickly without leaving a trace.

"Who can tell me what he's wearing on his face?" Lowe asked.

Janessa pushed in front of Kicker impatiently and looked up at the thing. It was about two feet taller than she was. "Um... some kind of twentieth century carbon filtration unit?" she guessed.

Kicker moved back to his original position as Tsunaron joined her in the open doorway. "It's a hockey mask," he said.

"Very good, Tsunaron." Lowe sounded genuinely impressed.

"What's a hockey mask?" Janessa wanted to know.

"Facial armor used in a sport outlawed in 2024," Kay-Em replied promptly, and looked over at Tsunaron as if hoping for a sign of approval.

"And it's absolute museum quality," Lowe said. "Amazing, isn't it? No doubt about it, we are looking at the find of the century."

Kicker felt a mild surge of irritation at hearing Lowe say the very thing he had been thinking aloud. Purely by chance, of course, but still.

"Azrael, are you paying attention?" Lowe asked suddenly, without taking his eyes off the figure in the cryo-unit.

"Uh, yeah, sure," said Azrael from another part of the room. Kicker turned to see him frowning at some frost-covered detritus sitting on top of a large, unmarked box or cabinet. One of the items was coffee mug that looked exactly like the ones in his sister's doughnut shop. Kicker couldn't help grinning to himself; proof once again of the long-lasting quality of a good design.

He knew that Azrael wouldn't be able to resist picking the thing up; worse, he saw that the kid had actually taken his gloves off. Before Kicker could warn him, Azrael had the thing in his hand and had already discovered that he couldn't put it down again.

"Well, don't touch anything," Lowe warned him and it was all Kicker could do to keep from laughing out loud at the alarmed look on Azrael's face. The kid glanced furtively over his shoulder to see if Lowe had noticed that this bit of helpful advice had come two seconds too late. Lowe hadn't; all his attention was on the find of the century. Azrael turned to Kicker and gave him a pained look while he tried to shake the mug loose. Chuckling silently, Kicker made a small, dismissive gesture to let him know that he wasn't going to rat him out to the professor. That Azrael possessed genius level intellect. but was definitely not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and he knew it too, which was probably what made the kid so likable.

Lowe was saying something about getting the figure in the cryo-unit back to the ship when a voice sounding extremely spooked interrupted him. "Uh, guys." Everyone turned to look at Tsunaron; he was standing over what seemed to be a pile of junk next to the far wall. "There's another body over here."

Kicker held his light out at arm's length to the left while bracing his weapon against his right side, ready to fire one-handed if he had to. He jerked his head at the others, trying to order them back but no one paid any attention. Naturally. They were all dull knives in the drawer today.

But at least there wasn't any real threat. There was indeed a body on the floor and it was frozen as solidly as the one in the cryo-unit. Two corpses, with nothing on 'em, to go, Kicker thought, as Kay-Em knelt down to take another set of readings.

"Well? Kay-Em?" Lowe said anxiously.

"She's perfectly preserved," Kay-Em said after a moment. Kicker felt the small hairs on the back of his neck stand up. She? "Cell crystallization is at twenty-five percent."

"Twenty-five percent?" Lowe's mouth dropped open. "Are you sure?"

"Suggest extensive nano-tech and phase one cell reconstruction," Kay-Em went on with what sounded like a casual air. "Chances of resuscitation are one in five."

"That's incredible!" said Lowe.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, now," Janessa said, pushing past the professor to crouch down next to Kay-Em. "Are you saying we could bring her back to life?"

"Precisely," Kay-Em replied, "but she is deteriorating. Opening the door has compromised her hibernation."

"Okay, that's it." Lowe grabbed his radio and called the shuttle pilot. "Lou, get ready for dust off. We have a priority evac."

"Copy that," came Lou's happy-go-lucky reply. "En route in five."

"Not five," Lowe barked at him, "now!"

Kicker gave a short, soundless laugh. If Lowe had talked that way to any other pilot, he'd have gotten an earful of abuse in return and if he'd failed to apologize, he might have found himself stranded and waiting for a charter to come out and pick him up, which he would have had to pay for out of his own pocket. In advance. It was the most expensive cab ride in human history and usually just the threat of having to take it was enough to teach self-important academics good manners, although there were a few who'd had to learn the hard way. Space flight was always a matter of life or death and if you wanted to survive it, you didn't interfere with the pilots who enforced this rule by making a point of being actively touchy.

Except for Lou, who for some reason was easy-going and friendly under most circumstances. Given his good nature, Kicker wasn't sure how Lou had managed to become a pilot at all, much less make a living at it. It really made him wonder what other pilots thought of this anomaly in their ranks. It also made him wonder about Lou himself—if he didn't get mad, then what did he do? One of these days, he'd have to get Lou drunk and ask him. He knew from experience that the only way to get a straight answer out of Lou about anything was to get him drunk first.

He slung his weapon and went over to where Janessa and Tsunaron were prepping the body they hoped to resuscitate. As Janessa brushed away more of the frost, he saw the woman had sustained a very nasty stab wound in her midsection. Abdominal

wounds were always nasty, but whoever had done this had pulled the blade out again immediately, guaranteeing that she would bleed to death, spending every moment until she lost consciousness in pure agony. Except she had been caught the freezing process before she could die from her injury. Kicker hoped she had gone under quickly.

A loud *thunk* behind him made him jump and he turned around just in time to see Azrael trying to dislodge the coffee mug still stuck to his hand by hitting it against the open doorway of the cryo-unit. It came off on the second try, but unfortunately, the kid also managed to dislodge an enormous chunk of ice from the ceiling of the cryo-unit. It fell right at his feet and exploded like a fragmentation grenade made of glass, sending razor-edged shards in all directions. They could all thank Christ it had been so cold in here that none of them had taken off their coats, Kicker thought as he shielded his face. Usually they whined endlessly about how they were roasting to death whenever he insisted they not remove their protective gear. Maybe if he pointed out that anyone without a coat would look like a mortally wounded porcupine right now, they would stop giving him such a hard time.

Azrael backed away as pieces of ice began dropping down from the ceiling one after another in bulky, irregular chunks. Damn, when the kid had knocked the big one loose, it had literally destabilized the rest of the ice up there. Heads up, Chicken Little; Kicker took a step towards Azrael who was looking around with guilty trepidation.

That was when he noticed that the figure in the doorway had begun teetering back and forth. Goddamn it, Kicker thought with the sensation that Geko so aptly described as a great rush of shit to the heart; the find of the century was about to topple over and smash into a bajillion itty-bitty pieces right before his very eyes. After which Professor Lowe would probably scream like a girl for the next thirty-six hours. When everybody's ears stopped ringing, Kicker would almost certainly find out this was his fault somehow: dereliction of duty for letting Azrael wander around freely, something like that. Unless he could catch it.

But even as he was lunging forward, it was too late. The air was filled with the incredibly loud noise of long-frozen ice cracking as the temperature in the room continued to rise, not enough for the people to notice any difference but more than enough to produce a

substantial change in conditions that had remained constant for over four hundred years.

This must be what it sounds like when an iceberg calves, Kicker thought with a feeling of surreality as he watched the figure in the cryo-unit swaying backwards and forwards seemingly in slow-motion. Every sway looked like it would be the last, but the figure would inevitably stop and move in the opposite direction. Fall backwards, he commanded the figure silently in the hope that all the ice and frost on the cryo-unit floor behind it might help to soften the impact and prevent it from shattering completely.

Instead, the thing wavered and swung itself upright for a fraction of a second before it tilted forward again and then kept on tilting as it went into its inevitable fall at last. That it was going to land directly on Azrael seemed equally inevitable to Kicker for some reason. Maybe it wouldn't shatter after all, although the kid just might.

Azrael had covered his head with both arms against the threat of falling ice chunks; he lowered them just in time to see the thing from the cryo-unit about to score a direct hit on him. Kicker was hard put to describe exactly what happened next. Either Azrael had been following an impulse to make up for screwing the pooch by trying to catch the thing before it hit the floor, thus saving the day as well as his grade, or he had simply been raising his arms again in sheer reflex and just not moved quickly enough.

Whichever it had been, Kicker was sure that didn't account for the sudden change in the trajectory of the thing's fall. It should have fallen right into the kid's open arms but at the very last moment, it swung several inches to Azrael's right and sideswiped him.

Or so Kicker first thought. Then he saw what looked like an enormous liquid red flower blossom where Azrael's right arm had been and realized.

Kicker felt his stomach lurch as the kid screamed. Instantly, Kay-Em was at his side, a syringe in one hand and a patch in the other before Kicker could even reach for his own emergency med kit. No competing with those reflexes, he thought, trying not to feel so relieved about it. Although there was nothing wrong with that, of course, since Kay-Em was also better at treating serious injuries in the field; nothing to do with being squeamish about severed limbs.

Even as all this passed through his mind, however, his training was already kicking in and he went over to examine the figure on the

floor. What the hell could have taken the poor kid's arm off?

"Fifty CCs of etherene," Kay-Em was saying as the kid screamed again, more in shock than in pain. "You'll be fine."

"What do you mean, I'll be fine?" Azrael wailed, clearly outraged by her matter-of-factness. "I'm missing my fu..." The rest of the sentence was replaced by a long sigh of euphoria. "Oh, wow. You're pretty."

Kicker glanced up to see the kid looking worshipfully at Kay-Em, unaware of anything else including the med-seal she was applying to the three-inch stump where his arm had been. Nothing was going to bother Azrael for the next four or five hours: Kicker wished he could have said the same.

Slowly, he stood up holding the long blade he had found on the floor not far from the figure's hand. It was a genuine, old-fashioned machete, the real deal. He could see a little of Azrael's blood and tissue starting to freeze on the cutting edge. The old machetes had been some pretty formidable weapons but Christ, what kind of metal was this? Four and a half centuries in a deep freeze and two minutes after it came out it could slice clear through an environmental protective suit and take a man's arm clean off? Instead of shattering like crystal?

And while he was asking questions, what was all the rest of that stuff staining the blade? The hairs on the back of his neck stood up again, this time sending chills all the way down his spine in a series of waves.

Abruptly, Lowe plucked the thing out of his hands with the fussy, possessive air of a man who felt a sudden need to remind everyone that he was in charge. "All right, everybody, let's get a move on here. I don't want anybody else getting hurt," he said. He turned to Azrael, who sagged ecstatically against Kay-Em and added, "In the future, try not to destroy the four hundred year-old artifacts."

Azrael raised his remaining hand and wiggled the fingers clumsily without taking his adoring gaze from Kay-Em's face. Lowe made an annoyed face and motioned at the kid's arm, still lying on the floor. Kicker picked it up and handed it to Janessa, not only because she was closest to him but also just to see her reaction. She shoved it back at him with a revolted noise and went back to helping Tsunaron with the other body. Resigned, Kicker tucked the kid's arm into his belt, noticing Lowe had done the same thing with the machete. He

didn't much like the idea of Lowe carrying that thing around and he knew the professor wasn't about to let him carry it for him, no matter how dangerous it was. Not that he wanted to carry it.

Nor did he want anyone else to carry it, either, he realized; not even Kay-Em. Suddenly he found himself wishing more than anything that he had never picked the thing up at all, that instead he had kicked it away to some far corner where it would have lain undiscovered till the sun went nova or the heat death of the universe, whichever came first. A blade like that was too dangerous even just lying on a shelf. Nobody needed a weapon like that, least of all a college professor like Lowe, who was now standing in the middle of the room with a grin even bigger than Azrael's on his face.

"We're gonna make history here, people!" he announced.

True enough, Kicker thought, seeing as how the figure on the floor hadn't shattered after all. Maybe slicing through Azrael's arm had slowed its fall just enough to prevent any serious damage, or maybe it was down to nothing more than dumb luck. Either way, it was in one piece, which was more than they could say for Azrael.

FOUR

Had Rowan LaFontaine been conscious as they reached the surface and carried her to the landing area where the shuttle waited in pre-launch mode, she might have thought that she was already on another planet. The environment here bore no resemblance at all to the wooded campground that had once been known as Crystal Lake. There had been no trees here for over three centuries; the lake, too, was long gone as was the topsoil, leaving a barren, desolate terrain continually scoured by the unceasing dust storms that blew at hurricane force.

Possibly due to the centuries-long absence of human industry, the air was breathable, but only just, and only for very short periods of time provided you didn't venture out into the open without a good filter over your nose and mouth. Otherwise, you'd find yourself with a double lungful of silicate.

But at least it wasn't hard to find a place to land a shuttle, especially for a pilot as skilled as Lou Goddard. Legend had it that he had once touched down on a rock formation only a few inches wider around than his ship, solely for the sake of impressing a woman passenger he was interested in. Anyone who had ever met Lou found the story completely credible, especially the women, in spite of the fact that no one had ever managed to track down the particular woman who had inspired that particular neat trick. Lou himself wasn't talking, something which both thickened the plot and actually made it even more believable.

At the moment, Lou was sitting comfortably in his custom-fitted pilot's seat, his ever-present leather cowboy hat tilted far back on his head as he watched the professor's little group on the console monitor struggling five hundred yards through the punishing winds with two rather large burdens. Christ, it looked like they were carrying a couple of people on stretchers, he thought. Had he miscounted the number that had gone out this time, he wondered, or had two of the students sneaked out after Lowe and the others had left? Seemed just like something that Stoney What's-His-Name and that girl Kinsa would do, they were a couple of real wild ones, especially the girl. Which meant it would also be just like them to get themselves hurt and have to be stretchered back by the others. Who

were, in turn, probably cursing him for not setting down a couple of hundred yards closer. Naturally, it wouldn't do any good even to try explaining about the kind of terrain for an optimum landing zone or reminding them that setting the shuttle down wasn't just a matter of getting a good parking place.

A light blinked on the console, letting him know that Lowe and his group had opened the hatch. A moment later, he heard the faint, tanky sound of their voices coming from the speaker to his right. Yeah, they were complaining about having to walk so far. The poor widdle kiddoes, he thought; they sure had it tough. But at least he didn't have to rag on their pampered asses to buckle themselves into their safety harnesses so he could get them off this godforsaken rock.

Behind him, the cockpit door slid open and Kicker came in. He plopped himself down in the copilot's seat looking a hell of a lot more cheerful than he had when they had landed.

"Are the doors secure?" Lou asked.

"Locked and blocked," he said, grinning.

"Beautiful," Lou said and adjusted his cowboy hat so it sat more firmly. "Prepare for lift off in three... two... and one..." The last word became a long, drawn-out vibrating syllable as the engines roared into life. Clutching the yoke firmly with both hands, Lou could feel the shuttle begin to push away from the ground, shuddering mightily as it fought to counter the force of gravity. There was nothing Lou loved as much as flying, all kinds of flying, from faster-than-light to non-motorized gliding, including parasailing. But his absolute personal favorite was dirt-side lift-off. That sensation of rising up, pulling free of the restraining bonds of a whole world and achieving escape velocity—man, there was no other feeling that came close, at least not as far as Lou was concerned.

"Oh, yeah," he said, laughing with pleasure. "I love this pa—a—ar—art..."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kicker still grinning at him like the cat who had gotten the cream. Or maybe the canary who had gotten the cat.

Eventually, the shuddering began to smooth out and became the steady, increasing pressure of g. forces pushing him into the cushioned pilot's chair. This was a different kind of sensation. Not exactly pleasant, or not what most people would have called pleasant, but not really unpleasant either. It was just kind of... odd,

how it felt when you were just about to move beyond the limit of gravity's reach, just before you pulled free of the grip of an entire world.

It always seemed to Lou that he could feel every cell in his body at that moment, billions and billions of tiny sparks of life that added up to the one live being that was himself. He thought of the sensation as both primal and mystical. Sensual mysticism. For Lou, this was what being a pilot was all about, which really made him wonder why the hell so many of his fellow pilots were always so damned grouchy, like they were wearing sandpaper under wear or something.

Through the cockpit windshield he could see the color of the sky darken dramatically. He took a slow, effortful breath. Just as his lungs reached capacity, a multitude of tiny points of light popped into existence at the same moment, he felt the earth let go of him. There was a surge of intense vertigo that was gone almost as soon as it registered on him.

There were three seconds of weightlessness before the shuttle's own field activated. Lou felt another surge of vertigo, followed by a throb from his sinuses. Damn dust; it blew around so hard down there that it always got into the shuttle somehow, double and triple seals notwithstanding. He popped a decongestant as he steered the shuttle through the junkyard orbiting the planet and then he kicked the course he had laid in over to the autopilot.

"So," he said to Kicker, pushing his hat back slightly. "What did you find down there?"

Kicker chuckled. "Oh, man, you won't believe it. Call the *Grendel*. Get the sarge on the horn, will ya?" "That good, huh?" said Lou, reaching for the com switch.

"Oh, yeah," Kicker said, his grin broadening.

Definitely the canary that got the cat, Lou decided. He just hoped there was enough left of the cat for all the rest of the canaries on this trip, himself included.

Sergeant Elijah Gulliver Brodski surveyed his team of ex-grunts hard at work on the various keep-busy assignments he had given them in the cargo bay and considered what he could have them do next to keep them all occupied and out of trouble when they had

finished up here. He was running seriously short on keep-busy bullshit and the team was getting restless. Even more to the point, they were onto him with the keep-busy bullshit—he had no illusions about that and never had. These weren't grunts, after all, they were ex-grunts. Intelligence in the ninety-ninth percentile of the ninety-ninth percentile, physical abilities developed and honed in training and in combat to a level that exceeded all previous notions of what was humanly possible. There was no slipping anything past a bunch like this, even if you had the kind of chops good enough not only to put you in command but keep you there as well.

Brodski had studied the matter of command very carefully, almost from the moment he had been offered the military option. He had been all of eight years old at the time, already two years into the advanced educational track when the soldiers had come calling, straight to his family, bypassing the usual visit with his teachers at school. His family, a multi-generational collective that would have seemed the antithesis of all things military, had been astounded to find that the quiet young scholar in their midst had as much physical potential as intellectual, and downright flabbergasted when he asked that he be allowed to accept.

The family had been quite sharply divided over the matter but fortunately for Brodski, his parents had acceded to his wishes without offering any serious resistance, although they had grilled him thoroughly for several hours first. Well, their version of grilling, which meant they took him on a day-long excursion to Martha's New Vineyard just off the Northern Gulf Peninsula for a lot of quiet, uninterrupted discussion while riding ferryboats. Neither of his parents would have been suited for anything even vaguely resembling a military lifestyle and couldn't understand why their son would even want to try it. But they had let him go anyway and for Brodski, it had not been leaving home but going home.

None of the ex-grunts under his command had been that young when they had signed up and he suspected that was a good part of what gave him the edge. Not all of them were lifers, either; Sven and Briggs had both announced their intentions not to re-enlist after their respective hitches were up. Sven said he was going into interplanetary banking, of all things, but Briggs seemed to have no definite plans. Brodski suspected she would end up back in the corps for lack of anything she liked better, thus discovering that she was

really a lifer after all. But he kept his thoughts to himself, sharing them neither with Briggs or anyone else. If Briggs wanted his advice, she would ask for it; otherwise, she wouldn't appreciate it and Brodski really couldn't blame her.

Sven on the other hand was a different matter. Brodski thought he might have been better off petitioning for early release and he was strongly tempted to tell him. And not simply because the big, golden-haired soldier was dogging Geko (again) instead of running a diagnostic on the micro-satellite (again). Brodski wasn't averse to sexual tension among the team members; it kept them alert. But with just under year left, Sven wasn't quite as focused as he had been. It wasn't enough to be noticeable to the rest of the team yet. He was still a good soldier and Brodski knew he could still rely on him. The guy was too intelligent and too well trained to make any seriously stupid mistakes.

But Brodski's own training enabled him to discern the first signs of restlessness in the man. In another month, he was going to start getting moody as well. According to Sven's psych profile, he was at the more emotional end of the mood spectrum, which in turn would make him a disruptive influence, despite everyone's best intentions. In Brodski's opinion, it was better to let the guy go early so he could take his exemplary record with him.

Now as he walked through the cargo bay, he decided he would take it up with Sven as soon as they got back to Solaris rather than waiting till they made planetfall on Earth II as he had originally planned. Best to get it over with as quickly as possible, give him the option of transferring out before the team got another assignment.

And from the look of things with Geko, that would be the best thing not only for the team in general but for her in particular. Geko was the newest member, with them only two months and a very good fit right from the git-go. It would be far better for her to adjust if Sven went before she got any more attached to him. Then she would have to invest more of her energy in bonding with another new face than missing good old Sven after he left.

Abruptly, a noise like a billion angry metal hornets scraping their stingers on a billion tin cans filled the air; wincing, Brodski turned to see Condor sharpening one of the four massive drill bits on the Mole. Dr Lowe had made a big deal out of requisitioning that fancy piece of archaeological equipment. They absolutely had to have it, they

needed it, there was no point in going on the trip without it. The class was bound to make some sort of find but how were they supposed to determine whether it was important or not if they couldn't even get it out of the ground?

Naturally, Lowe had gotten his way. Lowe always did. Not only had he gotten his way, he had also managed to finagle some kind of grant to pay for it, sparing both himself and the university the rather considerable expense. And now that the trip was just about over, the only dirt the thing had seen since they had taken it aboard was the dust that had collected on it while it sat unused in the cargo bay, and even that was mostly metallic, from periodic keep-busy honings. As a result, it would be going home with drill bits sharper than they would ever need to be. Brodski made a mental note to tell his team the Mole was off-limits from now on, if for no other reason than to spare himself from having to hear that grinding noise. Condor was completely unaffected by it, which was why Brodski usually stuck him with any jobs that involved the sharpening, grinding, or cutting of metal.

Condor rarely complained or showed any displeasure, about that or anything else. He had what Brodski's great-aunt Veruschka referred to as a poker face and that venerable lady knew whereof she spoke, having been extremely capable in that area herself. Until Condor had been transferred into his squad, Brodski had never thought he would ever meet anyone even half as gifted as his grandfather's sister but this guy would definitely have impressed her. And, considering he was all of twenty-three years old, he might even have unnerved her to the point where she almost blinked.

"Behind you, sarge," said a gruff voice.

Brodski stepped aside to let Dallas and Briggs push a giant winch hook past him to secure the chain so it wouldn't be swinging around like a deadly pendulum all the way back to Solaris.

"You hear?" Briggs was saying. "Division four just entered the occupied zone."

Dallas glanced quickly from her to Brodski and back again. "Casualties?" he asked, his voice tense.

Briggs gave a shrug. "Minimal?"

Dallas frowned, glancing at Brodski again. "How the hell did we get this screwed-up assignment?"

"Amen, bro," Briggs grunted. "I didn't join the corps just so I could be a friggin' babysitter."

Brodski glared at them but the expression was purely perfunctory and both Briggs and Dallas knew it. He couldn't blame them. Hell, he felt the same way himself a lot of the time but he made it a standing order that they should keep their complaining to a minimum. No matter how justified it was, you couldn't let a team do too much of that shit; it was bad for morale.

The communications link in his ear gave a short, gentle buzz. Brodski tapped the receive button in the center of the earpiece, grateful to have an excuse to signal Condor to stop what he was doing.

"Brodski here."

"Hey, sarge!" Kicker said coming through on the general channel so the rest of the team could hear. He sounded more excited than any one of them had in months. "You're never gonna believe this. We found a viable down there!"

"You what?" Brodski felt his mouth drop open. "Say again?" All activity in the cargo bay ceased as the rest of the team turned to look at him.

"You heard right, sarge. We found two bodies in deep cryostasis. Kay-Em thinks we can resuscitate the female. We're on approach now."

There was a faint but clear chuckle from Lou in the background. "Female? Oh, yeah..."

Brodski could see that the rest of the team was as astounded as he was. Except for Condor, of course, whose expression hadn't changed at all. "Roger that." Brodski looked around the cargo bay. "Okay, team, you heard the man. Company's coming. Let's get out the welcome mat!"

"Damn," said Condor, climbing down off the Mole as everyone else got busy. "I was hoping we might get to kill something."

Brodski gave a short laugh and opened a separate link to engineering. "Hey, Crutch, you copy?"

The only reply from the Grendel's engineer and copilot was a long, lazy snore. Crutch had never been one to waste any energy staying awake if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

"Crutch!" Brodski said, raising his voice. "Do you read me?"

Another snore.

"Crutch, goddam it, wake the hell up!"

The snore cut off sharply and a hoarse throaty voice said, "Whaddaya want?"

Brodski smiled sourly to himself. "They're on the way back from the surface," he said. "Prepare for docking and power up the labs, will ya?"

"Yeah, whatever," Crutch said, speaking through a yawn as he began stirring around.

Brodski decided he would leave the link to the shuttle open. It wasn't absolutely necessary but he preferred to keep an ear on the shuttle's progress himself. He was responsible not only for his team but for the security of every person aboard the *Grendel*, including the flight crew. Not that he was expecting anything to go wrong, especially with Lou at the shuttle's controls and Kicker riding shotgun. But if something did, he would hear it as soon as the guys in the cockpit did, which would give him extra time to react. Even few seconds could make a difference between survival and disaster.

But all he heard now as he got busy with the rest of his team was Lou and Kicker yakking away as they proceeded with a routine docking maneuver.

"So, what does she look like?" Lou asked.

"Cute," Kicker told him, laughing a little.

"Oh, yeah?" Lou laughed with him. "Cute and single, eh?"

"That's right."

"Mmmm, yeah." Lou's laughter turned slightly lascivious and then trailed off to end in a wistful sigh. "I'm so lonely."

Lusting after a frozen female he hadn't even seen? Brodski rolled his eyes. Lonely wasn't the word for it.

The team was assembled at the shuttle bay in plenty of time to meet Professor Lowe's group. Lowe came in first and started to give orders but Brodski talked over him. "Kicker, Briggs, you two take the girl. Dallas, Geko, you got the big guy."

"We need to get her to the lab now," Lowe said, pointing to the female as she went past them on the stretcher. There was no frost on her anywhere that Brodski could see although her body was

obviously still very stiff. They were going to have to work fast in the lab. If she thawed out much more, she would definitely spoil.

"Can you really bring her back?" Brodski asked.

"Well, we'll find out, sergeant," Lowe said and then turned to look at the figure on the other stretcher. Brodski gaped at it in astonishment. It had to be the ugliest thing anyone had ever brought back from old Earth, at least in Brodski's experience. It seemed to be shaped like a human but whether it was actually even humanoid was debatable. To Brodski, it looked like a hunk of spoiled meat wrapped in rags, with some kind of mask where its face should have been. Maybe it had been a person once, Brodski thought, but even then it must have been some kind of seriously abnormal specimen of human, one of Nature's more egregious mistakes.

"You're not thinking about bringing that back, are you?" he asked Lowe, staring after Dallas and Geko as they carried it away to the other lab.

"Hell, no," Lowe told him. "Impossible."

"Aw, shit!"

Brodski turned to see Azrael standing a bit unsteadily just inside the entrance to the shuttle bay, looking more than a little cross-eyed and alarmingly short of body parts.

"I forgot my arm." He staggered forward a couple of steps and stopped, swaying a little. Brodski took in the seal on the stump of his right arm along with his drunken demeanor and shook his head. To his knowledge, no one had ever lost a limb on a college field trip; leave it to Azrael to be the one who managed it.

Abruptly, Janessa came in behind him with the wayward arm. "Here it is." She shoved it at him and kept going, adding, "Dumb ass."

Azrael either didn't hear her or didn't care. He held his detached limb with the palm of the hand in front of his face and then shook it slightly so that the limp fingers seemed to wave hello to him. "Hi, hand," he said and giggled.

Maybe he ought to throw the kid over his shoulder and carry him to first aid, Brodski thought, but then Kay-Em was beside him and they were all heading down the corridor to the main area of the ship.

"Any idea how long the woman's been down?" Brodski asked.

"Four point five to five centuries," said Kay-Em.

"Damn." Brodski revised his estimate of how likely it was that she would actually live downward. No one had ever come up after being down longer than three hundred and change. "This'll be one hell of a wake-up call." If it works, he added silently.

"I'm bitchy as hell when I wake up," Janessa said to no one in particular and the universe in general.

"Really," said Tsunaron as he passed her quickly and trotted to catch up with Brodski and Kay-Em. "Did you just wake up?" Before she could answer, he turned to Kay-Em and said, "Once we're in the clear, I'd like to check your circuits."

"Oh, I just bet you would," Janessa put in, pushing between them and going on ahead.

"It's not like that," Tsunaron called after her testily.

Here we go. Brodski suppressed the urge to knock their heads together. They were always taking shots at each other; neither one could bear to let an opening go by. Brodski wished they would just go to her room or his and get it over with, and he was pretty sure that the only reason they hadn't already done so was walking beside him.

Kay-Em seemed to sense his gaze and glanced at him with a faintly questioning expression. She was one hell of a major accomplishment, all right, especially for a student like Tsunaron who didn't actually have his degree yet. Definitely proof of the kid's superior intelligence, all right. Even more telling to Brodski's mind, however, was Kay-Em's appearance. It was not simply that she was beautiful but that she was beautiful in an individual way. Like, well, an individual.

Any guy who made a sophisticated Knowledge-Matrix unit good enough for field work but also more beautiful than just about any of the other women in the vicinity was just begging for trouble, Brodski thought. The trip had been pretty quiet for the most part but they weren't home yet. There was still plenty of time for something to blow up.

FIVE

As Adrienne Hart hurried along the connecting hallway to the labs in the left pontoon section of the *Grendel*, she could hear the excited voices of the group that had just returned from the surface of Earth I. It sounded like they had made an especially exciting find down there. Well, good for them, but she still didn't regret not going. As Professor Lowe's head lab practitioner, she was on her third field trip to Earth I and although she was deeply fascinated with the old home-world and everything about it, she hated going dirtside. Thank God Lowe had stopped insisting that she go along with him to the surface. Being sandblasted by a hurricane was not her idea of fun. Lowe sure seemed to like it, though, or at least he was getting used to it. But then, she suspected Lowe didn't mind most kinds of rough treatment.

Now the professor's voice came to her from farther down the hallway. "Kinsa, where are the others?"

"Waylander's in Lab One," replied a young female voice. "He's charging the bed now."

"Good. Get Stoney and Adrienne into Lab Two." Pause. "And you two, take the big guy and meet them there. The female goes to Lab One with me."

"Oh, you guys always find the cool shit," kinsa complained.

Adrienne felt a surge of irritation. Stoney and Kinsa in Lab Two with her? A fat lot of good that was going to accomplish. She couldn't remember the last time she had met anyone as useless as those two. Maybe they really were bright enough to qualify for this course but she wouldn't have sworn to it in a court of law. The only thing they showed any interest in or aptitude for was—now, how did they put it in the late twentieth, early twenty-first century? Getting it on. When she had tried to talk to Lowe about the hyperactive tendencies of certain students, he had told her she had to word her complaints in the vernacular of the time, just like everyone else in the class. No problem for her, after all the hours she had put in with Lowe she could rattle it off in her sleep. But, to put it Lowe's way, what a friggin' pain already. Like the retro clothing he insisted everybody had to wear, herself included. She glanced down at her bare midriff and wondered, not for the first time, if every woman in the early

twenty-first century really ran around with her bellybutton on display. Knowing Lowe, she had her suspicions.

"Oh my God," she heard Azrael wail shakily. "My arm's not on my body!"

Adrienne frowned and slowed her pace very slightly. Azrael's arm was not on his body? She had no idea how that could have come about and she didn't want to. Nor did she particularly want to see the situation, she thought and slowed down a little more, listening to Lowe tell Tsunaron to take him to the smaller repair bed in Lab One to get him fixed up. Azrael's wails began to fade as Tsunaron took him away and Adrienne quickened her pace again. She reached the end of the hallway and almost bumped into Lowe as she turned the corner and entered the central area.

"Adrienne, good!" he said, his voice both delighted and urgent at the same time. "I need you in Lab Two."

"What's happening?" she asked. "You found something, didn't you? Is it something big?"

"Two viables." Grinning, he held up two fingers.

"Two?!" She had figured it was something major even for Lowe, whose luck in finding important artifacts was a lot better than average, but this was far and away bigger than she had imagined. "My God, in what condition?"

"Only perfect," he told her smugly. "We're about to attempt reanimation on one of them."

"Unbelievable!" she said, unable to suppress her excitement. "This is just unbelievable..."

"Un-freaking-believable," Lowe put in, by way of correcting her.

She gave him a quick nod of acknowledgment. "A walking, talking Earth I ancestor! I've got a million questions—"

"I know, I know," Lowe told her, but you'll have to save them for later. Right now I need you to complete a full endothelic structural scan on the large body."

"I'm on it," she said. "Not a problem."

"Great. Take point on this one for me," he said as he started towards Lab One and then stopped. "And use Kinsa and Stoney."

Adrienne made a pained face. "But they're only second year," she protested. "They'll slow me up."

"Just lead them through it step by step," said Lowe.

"But..."

"Just take them through it," he said, talking over her firmly. "Log him in properly and place him in stasis. I'll check back with you and go over your findings." He rushed off towards the lab.

"Right," Adrienne said, looking after him.

"My aaaaaarrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm." Azrael's wail echoed faintly through the ship.

"Your arm and my ass," Adrienne muttered under her breath and headed for Lab Two.

"My aaaaaarrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm," Azrael said as Tsunaron and Brodski loaded him onto the bed in the alcove in Lab One. "It's not on my body, dude."

"Relax. It will be." Brodski chuckled inwardly as he pushed the kid down so that he was lying in the proper position. "It will be. Just give it a few minutes."

"Yeah, just lie back, man," Tsunaron added. "Let the beautiful Nanotech 1000 make your arm as good as new."

Blinking in druggy surprise, Azrael looked from Tsunaron to the stump that ended just a few inches below his shoulder. "My arm," he said, speaking as if for the first time. "My arm, man. It's not on my body, dude."

"Don't worry, we gotcha," Tsunaron said soothingly, still working on the settings. "Now just lie back and don't move, or you'll have an elbow where a wrist should be." He finished with the settings and paused to make sure that both Azrael and his arm were in exactly the right position with respect to each other before he turned the ants loose.

As repair jobs went, this wasn't particularly complex or time-consuming and Brodski knew from his own experience that the process was completely painless. Still, he couldn't help feeling a little anxious for the kid as he watched. Lying there on the treatment bed, Azrael looked even younger than he was. Like a little kid, a child. Lowe should have been keeping a better eye on him and Brodski was tempted to say something about it. For all the good that would do; Lowe wasn't the kind of person who listened to anything anyone else had to say.

Well, at least the kid would be safe now that he was back on the ship. He could while away the trip back to Earth II hunting virtual monsters with Dallas in the cargo bay, where the worst thing that could happen was their having to reboot the game.

Although they had two completely separate entrances, Labs One and Two were actually situated side by side in the *Grendel's* starboard pontoon. They were partitioned by a wall with a large panel of unbreakable, translucent, soundproofed glass. Identically equipped with state of the art technology with self-contained power, they could re-allocate their respective resources between themselves and draw extra processing capacity from each other if necessary. Most ships of the *Grendel's* class were more than adequately equipped but only the *Grendel* had full-scale Nanotech 2000 beds in both labs as well as two compact alcove units, with enough juice to run all four at once if necessary, which made it Lowe's vehicle of choice despite its considerable expense.

Lowe's status at New Harvard, as well as in academia in general, meant that expense wasn't supposed to be an issue. Nonetheless, every so often someone on the university's board of directors would come down with a case of hardening of the purse-strings, an ailment characterized by an urgent compulsion to cut New Harvard's budget. Lowe wouldn't have even noticed, much less cared, except for the fact that he was always the first one the afflicted wanted to challenge,

There were actually other courses in the New Harvard curriculum that were even more expensive. But only Lowe's was open to undergraduates as well as students in advanced degree programs; in terms of undergraduate study, it was the priciest course by far, which was just the sort of thing that caused extreme distress to administrators in the grip of cut-the-budget fever.

Being challenged didn't worry Lowe in the slightest. To date, he was undefeated. All he had to do was go to a board meeting and show a few holos from field trips, maybe hand out copies of some grad student's testimonial, and that was pretty much the end of the matter. Till next time, anyway.

Once he had flown in a former student who had become a sensation in the more rarefied area of academia after developing

some kind of method or technique called temporal interpolation. Lowe actually had no idea what that was, but all the big brains were excited by it (not to mention all the little brains trying to pass themselves off as big brains) and the student claimed that studying with Lowe had been what had inspired her to explore the whatever-it-was in the first place. That had been an exceptionally definitive victory for Lowe, although afterwards, one of the board members had taken him aside and asked him, very politely, not to show off to such an extent in the future. Magnanimous in victory, Lowe had promised he wouldn't.

What a shame he was going to break that promise, he thought as he watched Waylander, Kay-Em, and Janessa moving around the still form of the woman on the table. He really had meant to keep it, but hell, this was the find of the century. What was he supposed to do, leave two cryo subjects to rot just because they were more exciting and important than anything else discovered on Earth I thus far?

He moved closer to the table where the woman lay. "Where are we?" he asked Waylander a little tensely.

Waylander checked the console in front of him. "Board's all green. The N2's warm and ready, teach." He held up one hand in an okay sign. Lowe nodded at him approvingly. At the moment, he couldn't have cared less whether they kept to the historic period or not.

"Good. Kay-Em, you begin stabilizing any cellular fractures."

"Yes, professor." She was already busy at the console directly opposite Waylander, her fingers dancing over the keyboard too fast for the eye to follow.

"Janessa?" Lowe looked around and saw she was standing at the head of the bed. "Give me a full scan. Glycerol levels, cerebral perfusion saturation, the works."

She wrinkled her nose; the only science Janessa had any interest in at all was biology and only on a very elementary level, but she obediently turned to the control panel. "I live to serve, professor."

Lowe smiled inwardly; there was a great deal of truth to that statement. "Okay, then. Let's see just what we're dealing with here."

"Thaw rate has accelerated," Janessa told him, her tone brisk and businesslike now. "Decrystallization of the membranes is now at thirty-two percent and rising."

"Good," said Lowe. "Now, someone get those clothes off her."

"I got it," Waylander said quickly, moving from his console to the treatment bed.

"I got it," Janessa said, grabbing the surgical scissors as Waylander started to reach for them. "Honestly, you'd think you'd never seen a woman before."

Waylander blinked at her, mildly offended. "Not a four hundred year-old naked one."

"Uh-huh," Janessa said, busy with the scissors. "And the difference would be...?"

"Waylander," Lowe snapped impatiently, "where are her diffusion barriers?"

"Seventeen and stable," Waylander told him, a hint of contrition in his voice. He was a good guy and a bright student but sometimes getting him to concentrate was a chore and a half. Of course, Janessa didn't help. She had changed from her environmental suit into one of her usual sex-queen outfits and the blouse she was wearing was—well, she was barely wearing it. It didn't leave much to the imagination; Lowe was having some trouble concentrating himself.

Janessa finished cutting the female's clothing off and then, as if she had caught the flavor of his thoughts, glanced over at him with a small enigmatic smile. "And she's clear," she said to no one in particular and covered the still form with the thermal blanket.

"Okay," Lowe said. "What next?"

"Finish removing the vitrified extra-cellular solution?" Waylander guessed.

Lowe made a face. He hated it when they guessed, especially when they guessed wrong. "That will happen spontaneously."

"Introduce metabolic inhibitors into the cytoplasm," Tsunaron called over from behind him.

"Very good," Lowe told him.

"I knew that," said Janessa.

"I knew it, too," Kay-Em added. Somewhat surprised, Lowe turned to look at her and saw that she had actually addressed this remark to Tsunaron. Damn! This was one of the best knowledge Matrix units he had ever seen but if he hadn't known better, he would have thought it was in the process of developing a feedback loop that was showing up as a simulated emotional attachment to her programmer. Its programmer.

"Yeah, okay," Lowe said. "I want everybody to stay positive and keep alert." He glanced back at the alcove where Tsunaron and Brodski were hovering around Azrael. "And how is he doing?"

"Just a couple more adjustments," said Brodski, checking one of the overhead read-outs, "and he'll be back in business."

"Good," Lowe said. "Tsunaron, when you're done there, I need you over here." He turned his attention back to the woman they were trying to re-animate and caught Janessa giving him a dirty look, as if his asking Tsunaron to join them meant he was denigrating her ability. Lowe smiled a little and shook his head hoping that would let her know this was just a matter of making sure Tsunaron did his share of the lab work but she stuck her lower lip out at him and turned away, refusing to be placated. No doubt he was going to have to work something out with her in a private-teacher consultation, which was just fine him.

Brodski watched as the lines of force that served to indicate the progress and location of the nanomechanisms everyone referred to as "ants" began to form from Azrael's arm and flow back into the receptacles on the edge of the bed. They had done a perfect job of re-attaching the kid's severed limb, as usual; there was no visible sign of any injury at all, let alone an amputation.

"Okay, son, you're damn near good as new," he said as he helped Azrael sit up.

The kid looked at him with half-closed eyes and grinned. Good as new but still high as a kite. He looked around dreamily and spotted the activity in the main part of the lab just as the woman's face appeared larger-than-life on the main monitor.

"Hey," he said, "Who's the grizzle grabber?"

"Uh-uh-uh, that's out-of-period slang," Tsunaron said to him. The kid couldn't have cared less. "We brought her back from Earth."

"No shit?" said Azrael, standing now. Brodski him as he swayed sharply to the left. "Can I have her?"

Brodski and Tsunaron exchanged amused looks. "Absolutely," Tsunaron replied.

"All right." Azrael rubbed his newly re-attached arm and flexed his fingers. He started to take a step and Brodski had to catch him again

as he swayed hard to the right. "Whoa. Still a little dizzy."

"Just take it easy," Brodski said, helping him steady himself. Holding onto him, Azrael moved his shaggy head slowly from side to side in an effort to clear it, whacking Brodski with the clutch of threefoot dreadlocks he insisted was absolutely authentic for students his age in the early twenty-first century.

"Yeah, okay," Azrael said, sounding a little more alert. But only a little. Brodski could see that his pupils were still quite dilated; he had a ways to go before he was within shouting distance of sober. "Hey, everybody? I'm gonna hit the grid. 'Kay?" He looked around as he waited for a response, his gaze coming back to Brodski, who nodded at him and mouthed, Go ahead.

Azrael smiled with druggy delight and moved off, staggering only a little as he found his way out of the lab. That's it, kid, Brodski thought at him; go play somewhere safe, where you can't get hurt. He was definitely going to get up in Lowe's shit about this, he decided. Just because the guy was an academic superstar didn't mean he could get careless with the students. Christ, they were all just kids really.

In Lab Two, Adrienne looked up from the computer to see Stoney pause on his way in to slap a perfect, in-period five with the now-restored Azrael as they passed in the hallway.

"Yowch!" Azrael said, tucking his hand under his armpit.

Laughing a little, Stoney gave her a conspiratorial smile.

Adrienne turned her attention back to the computer without acknowledging him. "Specimen 4420 found in sector 3920L on Earth Prime," she dictated briskly. "Subject discovered in complete cryosuspension. Severe loss in the axoplasmic proteins as well as major hemorrhaging in most major organs renders subject invalid for re-animation."

"Hey, Adrienne, where do you want this?"

She looked up at Stoney again; he was holding a data-kit in both hands. "Just put it on the specimen table," she told him. "We need to do a full morphological work-up on this one, so let's start with a..."

"Cerebral C-tep scan," Kinsa finished for her, goosing Stoney as he passed without missing a beat. "What?" she added, seeing the mildly

surprised expression on Adrienne's face. "I read the same med files you do."

"Mmmmmm," Stoney said with lascivious approval. He put down the data-kit and slipped both arms around Kinsa. "Smart and sexy."

"Initiating scan," Adrienne said, not bothering to hide her irritation. There they went, as usual. Those two couldn't seem to go two minutes without crawling all over each other. Two minutes? More like two seconds. This was a pretty randy group anyway but Kinsa and Stoney were the worst. They just wouldn't quit.

The large monitor above the table lit up with a graphic of the specimen which went from 2D to 3D as information from the scan started coming in. "Weight 309.7 309.7 mecrons," Adrienne noted, impressed

"Big sucker," Stoney said, also impressed.

"I bet he's hung like a mammoth," Kinsa added. Adrienne rolled her eyes. What a brilliant scientific observation. If male genitalia ever became the accepted laboratory standard of measure, she'd have Kinsa to thank for it.

"There's been massive cerebral diminution," Adrienne went on over the unmistakable sounds of two people groping each other behind her back. "A great deal more than would be expected in a..."

Kinsa squealed faintly; the sound hit Adrienne like fingernails on an antique slate and she turned around. Kinsa and Stoney froze with their hands on some of the more sensitive areas of each other's anatomy, looking surprised and guilty.

"Sorry," Kinsa said and cleared her throat. "You were saying 'cerebral diminution.'" She tried a tentative little smile on Adrienne, obviously hoping that this would indicate she had really been paying more attention to the subject on the table than to grabbing Stoney's ass.

Adrienne sighed. "Look, why don't you two just, oh, take a break."

"Oh, no," said Stoney, dutiful and concerned. Although not so much that he felt the need to let go of Kinsa. "We'll help. Really."

"Yeah, no problem," Kinsa added quickly, also still with her hands full.

"I can handle this," Adrienne told them firmly but not unkindly. All at once, she found her impatience tempered by a certain small amount of fondness. Maybe because in spite of her own dedication and ambition, she could remember a few occasions when she had

indulged in a little groping herself when the teacher wasn't looking. Or maybe because after they got back to Solaris, she was going on vacation where she would engage in more than a little groping of her own.

Or maybe between horny students and Professor Lowe, she was just getting soft in the head.

"Go ahead," she prodded. "Take an hour, come back when you're more focused."

Stoney's face lit up. "You mean it?"

Kinsa was already pulling him out of the room. "Thanks, Adrienne!" she said as the door shut behind them.

"Don't mention it," Adrienne said to the empty room. "Ever. It'll be our little secret. Just the three of us." She turned her attention back to the information coming up on the screen, noting that the specimen seemed to be thawing at a faster rate than expected but unaware of the repercussions this would have on her immediate future.

Or lack thereof.

SIX

In Lab One, Lowe had started to fidget. He had known that reanimating a cryo subject over four hundred years old would not be a simple matter but Jesus, how much longer was the goddamned Kay-Em unit going to putter around with the readings and the settings and the scans and all that? When were they going to get this goddamned show on the street? Or should that have been "on the road"?

Shit, what the hell did he care? Street, road—it was the same goddamned difference. Right now, he could dispense with his own rule about using in-period vernacular; it paled into complete insignificance next to what he had here. Along with just about any other considerations. His classes had brought back plenty of noteworthy artifacts from Earth I and he had the reputation to prove it. But this was several magnitudes beyond the most remarkable thing that he or anyone else had found on the long-dead home world. Nobody, absolutely nobody, had ever found salvageable life on a level of development higher than those cannibal insects. And now that he thought of it, it had been a hell of a long time since anyone had come across any of those, even.

Well, after today, it would probably be a hell of a long time before anyone went looking for mere bugs. Braithwaite Lowe had done what no one else could. And what he had was more than just some ragged little germ, more than a bug, more than a vertebrate, even. Not just a mammal but the mammal. Ladies and gentlemen, Professor Braithwaite Lowe, heir to Columbus, Einstein, Hawking, and anybody else worth a damn, brings you the discovery of the century. From beneath the wasteland of Earth I, a genuine Prevac human being.

No one was going to let that claim go unchallenged, of course, so the first thing he had to do was line up all the documentation. Get the whole class on record as well as the flight crew and the ex-grunts. Granted, as sources Lou and Crutch weren't exactly what anyone would call impeccable but it didn't hurt to have the working stiff represented in the credentials. Couldn't hurt at all, might even help. And no matter what pilots claimed, they were working stiffs. Of course, something like this meant the whole universe were just

working stiffs compared to the great Braithwaite Lowe, the only man who had ever recovered human life from Earth I.

And if Kay-Em fucked up the re-animation, he was going to rip her limb from limb and stuff the pieces up Tsunaron's genius ass. Sideways.

"Professor," said Adrienne's voice from a nearby speaker, making him jump slightly. "The specimen's cerebrum has shrunk so much that the remaining proteins make identification of the individual nerve fibers impossible." She sent a scan of the interior of the head to one of the larger display screens so everyone in the lab could see it.

"Amazing," Lowe said, still more concerned with the woman. "Well, just see what you can salvage from the optic cortex and then move on."

"My pleasure, professor. But just take a look at the brain on this subject, will you?"

"Wow, that is small," Lowe said, thinking she sounded pretty cheerful. Cheerful and alone—he hadn't heard anyone talking or moving around in the background. She had probably waited all of two minutes before finding some way to get Stoney and Kinsa out of her hair.

"Yeah, but how could he function with a brain that small?" Tsunaron said to no one in particular..

"Waylander manages," Janessa said sweetly.

"Oh, very funny," Waylander replied, looking down his nose at her with disdain.

Abruptly, several alarms went off at once, accompanied by various flashing lights, making all of them jump except for Kay-Em, who continued working as if nothing were happening.

"What's wrong?" Lowe demanded.

"She's de-animating," Waylander said.

Janessa consulted a panel of read-outs near the head of the bed. "Damn it, the lipids in her cytoplasm are separating."

Tsunaron was all but flitting around the room in a strangely organized flurry of activity, going from one place to another. "GTT is fifty-nine and rising."

"Kay-Em, what's her maximum limit transition temperature?" Lowe asked tensely.

"Eighty degrees, professor," she told him, working quickly but unhurriedly, as calm as ever.

"Well, we're at sixty-one now and rising," Tsunaron said.

"Is this bad?" asked Brodski, startling Lowe for the third time in the space of a few minutes. He had forgotten that the ex-grunt team leader was still in the room.

"If we don't get her lipids to reattach before the GTT hits eighty, she'll be a four hundred and fifty year-old vegetable."

"So what's happening?!" Lowe asked, raising his voice.

He rushed over to Kay-Em but it was Waylander who spoke up. "Her psychrophillic levels are still at forty-five over two hundred."

"QEPs are green," Janessa warned.

Tsunaron pushed between Lowe and Kay-Em to check something on the console. "Metabolic inhibitors are all in." He looked up at Janessa and then turned to Lowe. "What about the cryo-protectant in her lymphatic system? Do you think that might...?"

Lowe shook his head impatiently. "No, her potassium levels would be off the scale."

"GTT is sixty-eight and rising," Kay-Em put in calmly.

The students all froze for a moment, looking at Lowe.

"Stay focused, people!" he ordered them. "We got a problem, you find it, and find it now!"

Instantly, Tsunaron moved around to the other side of the table. "Initiating a Hex2 charge," he announced. "Kay-Em?"

"Engaged," she said.

Lowe looked at the woman on the table. There was no damage visible yet but that didn't mean she wasn't spoiling from the inside out. Damn it—

"Try the charge again," Tsunaron said.

"Still nothing." Waylander stepped back from the panel he had been working on and checked another display to his left. "Professor?"

"GTT passing seventy-two," Kay-Em advised neutrally.

"Lipids still falling," added Janessa, not neutral at all.

"Goddamn it!" Lowe floundered, overwhelmed by the stupid alarms that kept beeping and beeping and beeping. He should have told Kay-Em to shut them all off. How could anyone think straight with all that beep-beep-beep and the goddamn flashing lights? Great emergency system they had here; the design was more conducive to giving you seizures than helping

"Hey, I got it!" Janessa shouted suddenly. "I got !" She knelt down and made several adjustments to a small panel of controls on the

side of the bed.

Immediately, the alarms cut off.

"Lipid cohesion positive," Kay-Em informed them.

"Glass Transition Temperature sixty-seven and falling," Waylander said with a mixture of surprise and relief. "We're in the safe level." He turned to give Janessa a questioning look.

"Basal core temperature was too low," she said smugly and patted herself on the back, "causing a phase separation of her lipids."

"Well, yeah, no shit," Tsunaron said, frowning, "but what the hell did you do?"

Janessa gave a showy sigh of mock insouciance. "Oh, that," she said airily. "Her potassium saturation was causing the hippocampal dendrites to fire too early."

"Which caused the lipids to lose their cohesion," Lowe added as she turned her satisfied smile on him. "Good catch, Janessa."

She made a half-bow with a little flourish. "I had a good teacher."

"Okay," Lowe said. "Now let's bring her up slow and steady."

"I had a good teacher," Tsunaron said, mocking her bow

"Shut up," Janessa told him.

"Okay," Lowe said again, raising his voice a little. "Ready on phase two. Are we stable?"

"Stable," confirmed Waylander.

"Ready, sir," Kay-Em said.

"Stable," Janessa sang and stuck her tongue out at Tsunaron.

"Initiating res sequence," Tsunaron said, ignoring her.

Kids, Lowe thought.

"All right," said Waylander. "Bring on the ants!"

"And cross your fingers, people," Lowe added. The ants emerged in silvery lines like strands of living metal from all four corners and both sides of the table to swarm over the motionless form of the woman lying there. In thirty seconds, they had covered her completely.

They were not ants, of course, or any other kind of insect. Nor were they actually visible. The silvery lines were produced by an innocuous quasi-electrical field that had no effect either on the nano-mechanisms or on the processes they were engaged in. The field had

been added back in nanotechnology's first flush of post-breakthrough popularity, when both the price tag and ease of use had finally reached a level that made it practical enough for general use, for the sake of avoiding confusion as to whether the mechanisms were actually being deployed. It was an easy way of rendering the invisible visible without either interfering with or adding to the expense.

Also, those silvery lines looked great. They were aesthetically, technologically, and even intellectually sexy. Once more, science embraced art as a source of inspiration. Artistic experiments in science or scientific experiments with art produced variations in colors and patterns, although for the most part, there was no practical application for them; a few of them even rendered the nanomechanisms themselves useless.

Or rather, the ants. Exactly who had first used the name "ants" for the nanos was long forgotten before they had even left the confines of the lab for the wide-open realm of everyday human life. For all anyone knew, the name had applied itself. In any case, it wasn't really relevant. Ants they were, despite the fact that they had practically nothing in common with the originals, and ants they stayed. When you said ants, everyone knew what you were talking about. Not even the most straitlaced scientist used any other term for them. If you wanted to talk about the original, found-in-nature variety, you called them anthill ants or bug ants. But those only existed in specialist terrariums, having been no match for Earth II's native equivalent and thus didn't usually come up as a topic except in the most esoteric entomological circles.

Still, everyone knew what they looked like. The classic black ant was unchallenged and ubiquitous as the symbol for a nanomechanism, from children's educational cartoons to sophisticated laboratory displays like the one Lowe was watching with a concentration so intense that he kept forgetting to breathe.

He knew, of course, that the ants were a graphic translation of the ants at work inside the woman's body. There was nothing to see otherwise except dense technical read-outs on the various console screens and a human-shaped form in a sort of silvery cocoon on the table.

"Body temperature is ninety-six point two... ninety-seven," said Kay-Em quietly.

Lowe looked over at her and she gave a brief nod by way of letting him know everything was fine.

"Ninety-eight," she reported. "Ninety-eight point six, and holding."

Lowe was finding even the graphic translation on the display hard to follow. Ants were swarming over different areas of her body, coming together in a solid mass for a few moments and then breaking apart, scattering and regrouping elsewhere. A particularly dense mass had collected on what seemed to be an incision in her middle-left abdominal area. Apparently, there was a lot to do, a lot of tissue to mend. The ants working there took almost as much time there as the rest of them did repairing the rest of the body.

Abruptly, some of the silvery lines receded from the woman's extremities, uncovering her face, hands, and feet but growing thicker over her body.

"Cell reconstruction is complete," Kay-Em announced calmly. "Internal defib in three... two... one."

On the table, the woman's body gave a small jump and Lowe felt his heart jump with her. Then his heart leaped again, almost painfully this time, as she opened her eyes.

The sensation Rowan felt was not so much waking up or even regaining consciousness as it was coming back into existence.

No memory came with it, no context for emotion, and for the first few seconds, no information from any of her senses, or at least none that registered on her. For that matter, there was no such thing as those first few seconds, not in the standard way of time passing. Time itself, the very concept of duration, was coming back into existence along with her.

Only... coming back from where? The question bobbed to the surface of her mind with no particular urgency. She was not all the way back yet; as soon as she was, she would know that and a whole lot more. Knowledge—something to know and the act of knowing it—was another one of those things that, like time and herself, had been in suspension.

Cryosuspension.

Immediately, it was all there, complete and uncut, before her mind's eye. It was a mental movie not subject to the constraints of

time or space—the former to keep everything from happening at once and the latter to keep everything from happening to you, as famously noted in the *Book of Klages*—so that she got it all immediately. The underground headquarters of the Crystal Lake Project, the long hours of demanding work to perfect the cryostasis process, despite the fact that their first subject was not exactly the epitome of fragile... Jason Voorhees.

Terror spiked through her with electric frenzy before she actually had any physical sense of her body. Oh, yeah, the memory might be complete and uncut but she wasn't, not by a long shot. As hard as she had tried to make it otherwise, the hubris of Dr Dickhead Wimmer had doomed them all. Because he refused to concede to her expertise, because he had refused to believe that anyone, let alone some unknown girl scientist, could possibly know better than the great and powerful Wimmer about anything, especially Jason Voorhees. No one could instruct the great and powerful Wimmer, not no way, not no how, no sirree, not in this lifetime.

Well, he had sure gotten his way on that one.

When she had shut Jason in the cryo-unit, she had thought her greatest regret, besides the loss of all those innocent soldiers' lives, would have been that the last thing Wimmer ever heard was not her voice saying, I told you so

Changed her mind about that in a hurry, hadn't she? The force of Jason's blood lust had given him the power for a last homicidal gasp, one more for the road, so to speak, the long, icy road into deep-frozen darkness. As luck would have it, it had also been a toll road and she had had to pay the freight. Unfortunately, the cost had been her life.

But she remembered now that as her eyes had closed, she had felt as much relief as she had regret, because this meant it would be over. Jason Voorhees, though un-killable, was no longer unstoppable. That had been the good news that had made the bad news of her guts oozing slowly out of the stab wound in her stomach almost bearable. If it had been up to her, she would have lived through this. No two ways about it, dying sucked. But at least she hadn't died for nothing.

Except... Cryo-unit breach. Lockdown in progress.

Except apparently she hadn't died after all.

Well, if that don't beat all. Holy guacamole, get a load of that, will you? Can you believe this? Ain't that the damndest thing? Will

wonders never cease?

As she had disappeared into the cold darkness, she had been so sure that that had really been the end. Anyone still alive in the Crystal Lake facility would have run for the emergency exits without stopping even to count the corpses much less check any of them for a pulse. After which the government, having reviewed the surveillance recordings as well as survivors' testimony (if any), would simply order the facility to be sealed up untouched and as-is, with the idea that containing the danger was more important than removing the dead for traditional burial. Or so she would have thought, had she lived long enough to give the matter any consideration.

The surveillance footage. When the advisory board for the Crystal Lake Project reviewed the surveillance footage, they must have seen what she had done and what had happened to her and decided to recover her to see if she were viable. Cryo was still a relatively new technology but if she had had the good luck to freeze before she had died of the stab wound, her chances of survival would have been reasonably high. And wonder of wonders, good luck had been with her. She had survived not only her wound but the still-iffy process of revival as well. She lived. Jason Voorhees had not been able to kill her.

Maybe that meant she was unkillable now. Maybe in the act of passing his machete through the thick steel door into her stomach, Jason had in fact passed the torch, in a manner of speaking,

And then again, maybe he hadn't. Maybe he was still viable himself, despite the fact that he was several hundred feet underground frozen solid in a cryo-unit cocooned in a layer of ice and frost several inches thick. Or maybe whoever had brought her out of her frozen tomb had not learned from Wimmer's fatal mistake and removed Jason as well, thinking they could do better. Her eyes fluttered open in panic. Light came crashing in on her, piercing her all the way through to the center of her brain, it seemed. She felt her head roll from one side to the other. She was lying flat on her back in a very bright room, or at least one that was a great deal brighter than the murky frozen place she had assumed would be her final resting place.

A hospital? Or was she elsewhere in the Crystal Lake facility, like the infirmary? Oh God, she thought, panic rising with her level of alertness; what if they hadn't learned anything from Wimmer's

incredible stupidity after all? What if they had simply re-staffed and kept the Crystal Lake Project going? No, she thought, squinting against the light in her eyes, trying to force them to adjust so she could see what madness she had woken up to.

The blurry, watery shadows began to resolve themselves into more definite shapes. Rowan blinked the tears away fiercely, trying to find something she could actively look at. Or someone-the shapes surrounding her were beginning to suggest something of human beings to her. Human faces: they were faces.

As the light became less painful, her vision started to improve more rapidly. At random, she chose one of the faces on her left to focus on and hoped she had come out of this with at least adequate eyesight, no cryo-induced macular degeneration or retinal damage. So far, so good; she could see now that the face belonged to a man. In another few seconds, she would know whether the face was familiar or not. More tears suddenly welled up in her eyes, making them sting. She blinked them away and the man's face came into perfect focus.

Wimmer.

The cry burst out of her, a spontaneous sound of undiluted horror and outrage with the full force of herself, body, mind, soul, and instinct, behind it. Panic was a pale thing compared to this combustion, which was not a process but a state of being

Rowan neither saw nor felt her hand strike the man's face, nor could she ever remember hitting him no matter how hard she tried. She realized that he was not Wimmer long before she understood why he was bent over covering his nose with both hands and howling in pain.

"Heart, BP, brainwaves all show green," someone said calmly. "Vital signs are normal. And strong."

"No shit," said the man in a muffled, nasal voice. "I think she broke my nose."

"I like her already," another person said in a stage whisper. Rowan knew immediately he was talking about her and she decided that, whoever he was, she liked him too, or at least the sound of him. As soon as she got her bearings, she would make him introduce himself.

For some unmeasured period of time, it seemed as if she wasn't going to get her bearings; her eyes were darting from one side to another in their sockets in a way that felt strangely compulsive. It

was as if she were afraid to look at any one thing or person longer than a couple of seconds for fear that she would see, and whoever had rescued her had managed to rescue him too and were now taking orders from him.

After a bit, she found herself sitting up on some kind of firm, padded surface similar to a doctor's examination table under the watchful gaze of five or six people. She was wearing nothing but the blanket she was clutching to herself, something made out of a very unusual material that looked like chain mail and felt like fluffy lamb's wool, minus the itch. Nice stuff, she had never seen anything like it before. Nothing even remotely like it.

How long have I been down?

The question stuck in her throat, too bulky to ask or to swallow, too hard to melt away. It was like being on the verge of tears while desperately trying to hold it back.

And that was the only real discomfort she felt, she realized. Her head was not heavy or painful, her joints weren't achy from disuse, her muscles felt normal not atrophied, not even very slightly, which they had discovered was unavoidable, no matter how thoroughly a living, mammalian subject had been frozen. She should have been feeling more than a little bit hung over, groggy for sure with an acid stomach but there was nothing wrong with her stomach and, despite her earlier feeling of disorientation, her head was actually quite clear.

"Easy, now," said the man she had hit. He was still holding his face with one hand but he spoke soothingly, with a tentative smile.

She looked him over carefully, wondering how she could have thought he was Wimmer. The guy looked nothing like him, didn't even sound like him. Maybe she had been dreaming. It was impossible to dream in cryostasis, but there was nothing to say it couldn't happen just before waking. Especially for someone who had been down a long time.

So just how long have I been down? How long? How long?

The question stuck in her throat suddenly vanished, replaced by a new thought.

"Did you get him?" she asked. Her voice was soft and a little bit unsteady but otherwise normal, at least to her own ears. It felt normal. But perhaps that was just some kind of illusion, maybe she didn't sound as normal as she thought. Or maybe they couldn't even

understand her at all. Otherwise, why would they all be standing around looking at each other with open bewilderment?

"Get who?" said the man with his hand over his nose.

Oh God. Fear leaped in her chest. She had been hoping for "yes" and dreading "no", but for them not to know who... Oh God.

"Then he's still out there?" she asked, feeling herself begin to tremble.

"Hey, shh, it's okay," said the man anxiously. "Everything's all right. There's no one out there. You're perfectly safe here."

Here. Which was where? Rowan took a deep breath. "Where am I?" she said finally, looking at each person. They all seemed to be just as anxious as the man, concerned for her the way good people cared about other people, even a stranger in their midst. "The last thing I remember, there was a leak in the cryo-unit. Is it... is it contained?"

For a moment, no one said anything. "It is contained," the man told her after a bit. "But when the cryo-unit ruptured, I, uh, I'm afraid you didn't escape it. It put you into stasis."

More of the room came into focus for her then, particularly the equipment: the screens, the consoles, even the table she had been lying on. She had no idea what any of it was for, exactly, or how it worked but she understood that it was more advanced than Crystal Lake's technology by an order of several magnitudes. While the people themselves... Well, they were obviously people just like her, only there was something about them. They were all in such good shape in a way that went beyond the matter of their physical attractiveness.

"My God," Rowan whispered. She took another deep breath, let it out again, and made herself go on. "How long was I...?"

The man hesitated. "The year is 2455."

His words hung in the air as if they were in the process of solidifying into a tangible object she was meant to take hold of and keep with her from now on.

"Twenty-four fifty..." Rowan whispered, acutely conscious of her lips forming the words. The numbers.

"I know this is a huge shock, but you're gonna be safe here," the man went on. "You're aboard the *Grendel*. It's a class four catamaran transport ship."

She was aboard a what? A catamaran that was somehow also a transport ship? It was the year 2455 and she had been thawed out on

a boat?

"We're on our way back home," the man was saying, "and you're gonna be just fine."

"Twenty-four fifty-five." She tried to picture the numbers in her mind, imagining them as a digital read-out, as typewriter print, as careful handwriting in fine blue ballpoint ink.

In the year 2455... Nope, sorry, not that; right idea, wrong date. Try again.

"That's... That's over four hundred years," Rowan said in a whisper. She must be in shock now. Who wouldn't be, after finding out something like this?

The man kept telling her she was going to be just fine. Over and over. Maybe because he was in shock, too. Who wouldn't be?

"Over four hundred years," she whispered, so softly now that she could barely hear herself.

SEVEN

While the *Grendel* was nowhere near the largest spacecraft in active service, either military or civilian, it was one of the largest ships in its class. The catamaran designation was a bow to the ancient sea-going vessel it resembled, even though the layout served a completely different purpose. Buoyancy and wind resistance had not been considerations, of course; personnel and cargo were contained not on but in the two pontoon-like structures connected to the central portion housing the bridge and engineering, along with private quarters for the pilot and copilot.

The development of aerodynamic been the triumph of heavier-than-air flight. The triumph of commercial heavier-than-air flight, however, had been the development of a technique for making big spaces small and small spaces big. Technologically advanced as the *Grendel* was compared to the most sophisticated astronautical craft from Rowan LaFontaine's long-dead heyday, the meticulous, not-an-inch-wasted layout and organization would have been instantly familiar to flight attendants from any era.

A submarine crew from Earth I would have been even more impressed. Despite the obvious extreme differences, they would have recognized the human dynamic. Astronauts from the twentieth century would have ruptured with envy; their contemporaries who were avid connoisseurs of space films, books, and/or games would have been heavily critical at great length.

Rowan LaFontaine was none of these things, which meant that she couldn't even conceive the irony of the situation, let alone appreciate it. The only other person familiar enough with the era to do so was Professor Braithwaite Lowe. The thought, however, never crossed his mind; he had a very clear idea of what he was looking for on these field trips and it sure wasn't irony.

For a while, Lowe had honestly been afraid that the psychological shock would ultimately be too much for the viable, sending her into systemic failure. They could have resuscitated her again, but the prognosis would not have been good. Even if she came back without serious brain damage, she would be insane in a way that defied treatment. You really had only one chance with lifers and if they went down, the kindest thing to do was let them go.

Braithwaite Lowe was a friendly, even a cheerful man. He saw himself as happy, and the few people who didn't know him very well thought he was a nice man. But he was not, and never had been, a kind man. In the event of the viable slipping into systemic shock, he had had no intention of just letting her fade away. He would have put her on full life-support even if she had come up brain-dead and would have arranged the best in round-the-clock maintenance and therapy. He had recovered two corpsicles, an unprecedented record in itself. One, he had been forced to concede, was unsalvageable, but no power in the universe was going to make him give up the other one, no matter what. She wasn't just another of his usual exceptionally important Earth I recovered treasures, she was incontrovertible proof of his status as the most important human being ever.

That was not megalomania if you were rich. And God, did he need to be rich. Or more precisely, he needed to be rich again.

Well, technically, he was still rich. In terms of unadorned numbers, he was rich and getting richer. The problem was, he was rich and in debt. Back when he had been poor, he had also been in debt. But that was different; it was the kind of debt familiar to all poor people, in which there is always a bill or an outstanding balance or an overdue invoice, or all of the above. In that first heady flush of celebrity and affluence, he had had the satisfaction of getting himself out of debt and he had been so rich, it had seemed as if he would never have suffer the indignity of being in debt again. No more financial embarrassment for Braithwaite Lowe, not in this lifetime. He sure of that.

However, it wasn't long before he discovered he had simply been thinking small. If being poor and in debt had been a pain in the ass,

it was nothing compared to being rich and in debt. Being rich and in debt was a whole different level of trouble; it was no longer a matter of worrying over the consequences of a poor credit rating or dodging bill collectors. Being rich and in debt involved sums that could get you seriously injured, even killed. Or just wishing you were dead, which was a whole lot worse.

By the time he was scared enough to look for serious help with financial planning, no one wanted to touch him. Advisors told him his situation was too complex, beyond their areas of expertise, and, when he became too insistent, they weren't taking on any new clients at the moment anyway. Eventually, he found his way to accountancy methods that operated in the gray areas that he now inhabited.

What he found most amazing was not the degree of his own desperation or how far down the rabbit hole it had taken him in such a relatively short period of time but the fact that the double-talk was exactly the same. Regardless of whether he was dealing with a thirty-second degree CPA whose guild ancestry was traceable back to the first generation to settle on Earth II (the Ancient Guild of Certified Public Accountants loved ritual even more than the also-still-extant Freemasons) or a seasoned and unapologetic fence who had seen everything except an authentic bill-of-sale, they spoke the same language.

Lowe was quick to find comfort in this. Hearing the same jargon from all financial experts, legitimate and otherwise, had to mean that they were really all the same. A fence was basically an appraiser, a loan officer was a fence who didn't actually have to handle inventory, an insurance broker was a glorified bookie, and a tax collector by any other name should still be avoided. Therefore, he concluded, so-called legitimate business wasn't really all that legitimate, while supposed crooks were just trying to make a living like anyone else. Thus it also followed that the ideal person for him to do business with was someone with a foot in both worlds, the legitimate and all the various gray areas as well, someone who would willingly switch back and forth as necessary. Because in the end, it was all just business.

It was this sort of thinking that brought him finally to Dieter Perez. Lowe had known Perez for slightly over a year and had yet to see the limit of his skills or contacts. He could talk to a bank president or a crime boss with equal aplomb, dodge questions while seeming to answer them, and acquire information without so much as alluding to what he wanted to know. He was also good at finding things that had been hidden or lost, and losing anything that might prove inconvenient.

Exactly how Dieter Perez had become so accomplished was a complete mystery to everyone who knew him, if anyone actually knew him. There was no evidence that anyone had ever managed more than merely being acquainted with him well enough to do business. Lowe had decided he was going to make time to do just that. He was going to find out what made Dieter Perez tick, what he had done to become the man he was today. Then he was going to duplicate it, making himself into the equivalent of Dieter Perez, which would eliminate the need for outside help in that area. That bit of streamlining would save him a lot of time and money, something that Dieter Perez himself would have approved of, obviously.

Of course, before he could even begin to do any of that, he had to get his finances straightened out first, and Jesus, that was taking a hell of a lot longer than he had thought it would. Months would go by and he would find himself no closer to even a partial solution to his problems. More often, he could count himself lucky if they didn't get any worse and lately he hadn't been too lucky even in that small way. Things weren't getting worse with the same momentum as they had before he had found Dieter Perez, but they most definitely weren't turning around, either, and time was not on his side.

The night before he had left his luxury New Harvard penthouse to meet up with the class on Solaris, he had forwarded the entire contents of his inbox to Dieter Perez without reading any of it, knowing that Dieter would phone back immediately.

Dieter's response was instant, as if he had already had his own inbox open when Lowe's little surprise had come in. Lowe had been fully prepared for Dieter to tear him a new one, maybe even two new ones, for deliberately violating the no-dumping rule. The first thing

Dieter set down for everybody was the no-dumping rule. If you had bad stuff in your inbox that you wanted him to handle for you, you did not just send it all to Dieter. You put it in a separate drawer in your own storage and sent Dieter a key. Then he could access it without having to be in possession of it, even just virtually. If it was something bad, it was going to stay that way no matter where it was. Keeping it yourself wasn't going to make it worse than it already was, any more than sending it to Dieter could make it better. Besides, he was not in the business of providing storage space.

Lowe listened as Dieter ran through a wordy paraphrase of this, including a generous amount of redundant profanity and an assortment of insults in several different languages. None of it was anything Lowe hadn't heard before, including the threats. He only began to worry when several minutes had passed and the man's vehemence showed no sign of abating even slightly. Then Dieter suddenly broke off the diatribe and erupted with a series of long, intense, wracking coughs that had an unhealthy wet sound. Terrified that he had gone too far, Lowe had babbled apologies and promises even after the icon signifying that Dieter had muted him appeared in the lower left hand corner of the screen.

Eventually, Dieter stopped coughing and quite a long time after that, he calmed down enough for the more normal sort of conversation to ensue. To Lowe's relief, Dieter did not follow through on his threats to terminate their arrangement. And although he pronounced Lowe's explanation of why he had behaved like an asshole, to be ten pounds of shit in a twenty-pound bag and Lowe himself to be the exact opposite, he also spared a few words that were vaguely reassuring. But only because he knew Lowe was about to take another one of those field trips to the old home world.

Lowe had still been nervous after he had hung up. He had been very foolish to become so dependent on Dieter Perez. Even if the guy didn't just lose it some day and cut him loose with no resources and no protection, that cough had sounded like death itself. Probably lung cancer, which was nothing serious if you kept up with it. If anyone could afford the finest in medical treatment, it was Dieter Perez, except he hated to take time out for anything that didn't

involve increasing his own wealth. He would end up putting that kind of routine maintenance off until it got serious enough to mean substantial down-time, maybe as long as six months for a full in-chest re-growth.

If something like that happened to Dieter, what the hell was he supposed to do? Hide out in another country under an assumed name until Dieter was back in harness? Even if he had been willing just to consider such a course of action, he couldn't have pulled it off without Dieter's help. Not that it was a reasonable alternative. It would mean giving up everything. Not just the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed, with all its perks and benefits, but his career, his status, his name, and any hope of ever getting any of them back. He would have to remain hidden in a menial life with minimal comforts where the best he could hope for on any given day was that absolutely nothing would happen. What the hell kind of life was that? It was no life at all, really. He'd have been better off letting the debt collectors cut their losses by selling him for parts.

But now all those worries were in the past. After this trip, he would never have to worry about being rich and in debt again. A find like this meant he was never going to run out of money, or anything else he wanted. Of course, he was going to follow his original plan to spend less and invest more, choosing the safest options he could find even if they were slower to pay off than the higher-risk stuff. He would make sure he had a safety net. Although he wasn't going to turn into a miser, either. He wouldn't have to deny himself anything he really wanted. No point to that—after all, you couldn't take it with you.

All of this had been spinning round and round in his mind while he and the others had been monitoring the newly-revived woman, trying to minimize the shock to her mind and body while making her as comfortable as possible. The ants had been designed to stimulate endorphin production and then enhance the effects while they worked for the sake of counteracting trauma. As a result, most people got up off the table and walked away feeling good as new if not better, even after something as massive as a total body reconstruction

But the woman they had thawed out hadn't seemed to respond quite as well. Apparently finding out you were now over four hundred and fifty-five years old was more of a shock than the ants could deal with. Kay-Em had administered a little extra medication and that appeared to keep her anxiety from getting any worse. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to decrease it very much if at all.

Then she had grown tired all of a sudden and before Lowe could even tell Brodski and Tsunaron to take her to one of the spare passenger cabins, she was fast asleep. Probably the best thing for her, Kay-Em had said and no one had been inclined to argue about that. Perhaps because they were all tired themselves, Lowe thought. They certainly looked as if they needed a nap. He certainly could have used one. But his fatigue was mixed with restless excitement and he knew that if he actually did lie down, he wouldn't be able to close his eyes. Because this was the Big One, the Biggest of Big Breaks and he was too tired to sleep, too excited to think, and too close to heaven to slow down now.

After making sure the surveillance in the woman's cabin was set on continuous and it would page him as soon as she woke up again, he had told the students to take a break and then, barely sparing a thought for Adrienne hard at work in Lab Two, he headed for his own quarters at a dead run. He couldn't wait to see the look on Dieter's face when he told him about this find. Dieter wasn't just going to shit, Dieter was going to shit pears. And then pineapples. Followed by bananas, coconuts, and those weird purple mutant strawberries that were the latest designer fruit craze. Dieter was going to shit an entire cornucopia. And then, in honor of Lowe's course which was directly responsible for this good fortune in the first place, wild monkeys would fly out of Dieter's butt and Lowe would award a *summa cum laude* to every student who identified the reference.

And they would all live happily ever after.

"Secure line," Lowe said into the console microphone on his desk. The built-in screen lit up with a go-ahead for voice commands. "Perez, Dieter, Solaris Research Station. Connect."

Using a secure line always meant having to wait a few extra seconds. He tried to be patient while the call went through but it seemed like a week before the screen finally changed to show him the unshaven, rumpled features of Dieter Perez, whom he had obviously just woken up. Immediately, he zapped all the pertinent data on the find, making sure that it would open in a new panel on Dieter's screen.

Frowning, Dieter blinked groggily at him as if he were having trouble remembering exactly who Lowe was. Then his eyes seemed to refocus. "Lowe," he said in a rasp that had only slightly more gravel in it than when he was wide-awake. "Lowe, you bastard."

Lowe folded his arms and sat back in his chair, waiting for him to notice the extra data he had sent. "Dieter, this is your official notification: we have hit the mother lode.

Dieter barely glanced at it. "Do you know what time it is here?" he asked grumpily. "Just because Solaris is an orbiting city doesn't mean we don't have day and night here."

"We're six parsecs away," Lowe said dismissively. "How the hell do I know what time it is there? Didn't you hear what I said? We just hit a goldmine."

Dieter made a disgusted noise and wiped a wrinkled hand over his face. "Lowe, you bastard, a box of DVDs is not a gold mine. I told you, I can't move 'em."

"Just look at the file, will ya?" Lowe snapped.

Dieter gave him a poisonous glare but did as he was told. Damn, he was looking rougher than usual, Lowe thought as he watched for some reaction. Good thing he had made this find now. This time next month, Dieter could be zipped into a body bag for one of those last-resort overhauls, the kind where they didn't guarantee you'd come out again.

After a bit, Dieter looked up at him again, raising one eyebrow in a question.

"Two four hundred year-old frozen specimens," Lowe said, just in case Dieter was still too sleepy to make sense of anything. "One well-preserved and one, i'm not shitting you, up and walking around."

Dieter nodded. "Four hundred years old and walking around." His voice was as expressionless as his face.

"Four hundred and forty-five years, to be exact," Lowe corrected him proudly.

"And who gives a shit?" said Dieter. "Who the fuck cares?"

"People," Lowe replied, barely managing to keep from adding, you total moron. "People will pay huge money to see her, they will. She's a medical anomaly. There's nobody like her.

"Let me ask you a question," Dieter sighed. "Is this the first person you ever re-animated?"

"No, of course not," Lowe said, feeling slightly offended now. Was Dieter playing mind games with him? The time he had spent working in medical rehab on an interdisciplinary fellowship was a matter of public record, and he always made sure that it was mentioned in every single article written about him.

"And how many other people are out there today around thawed out and looking good?" Dieter asked.

"Well..." Lowe grimaced with irritation. "Hundreds. But—"

"Thousands," Dieter said, talking over him.

"All right, maybe," Lowe said quickly before he could go on. "But none of them are four hundred and forty-five years old. This woman is nearly twice as old as anybody alive."

Dieter rolled his eyes. "Two-fifty, four-fifty, there's no difference, professor. Not to your average citizen walkin' around with them. A hundred years ago, when reanimation was more unpredictable, sure. Great big fucking deal! Alert the media! But now it's just old news."

Lowe leaned forward and looked into the screen urgently. "But..."

"Old news," Dieter said again, regarding him through his very baggy half-closed eyes. Lowe knew that look; he had seen it before. It meant any further talk on his part would be a waste of breath.

"But I need money," he whined.

"I know, I know," said Dieter with mock sympathy. He seemed about to break the connection and then paused, looking at something else on the screen. "This other viable of yours is marked Voorhees. That wouldn't be Jason Voorhees, would it?"

It was Lowe's turn to blink in surprise. "Yeah, it is. Who's Jason Voorhees?"

"Only one of the most famous murderers ever!" Dieter told him. "He killed something like two hundred people and then simply disappeared without a trace." His voice had warmed up considerably and his expression was no longer bored or annoyed but interested. "Goddamn. Jason Voorhees. My God, to the right buyer, he could be worth a fortune."

A fortune. Lowe's heart gave the same kind of intense, painful leap as it had when he had seen the woman's eyes open. Fortune was not one of those words that Dieter just threw around in casual hyperbole. Dieter's idea of a fortune was what other people would have defined as wealth beyond imagining. It was all he could do to keep from kissing the console screen.

"Is that so?" he heard himself saying, "How much of a fortune?"

Dieter gave a short laugh. "Enough to keep us in whisky and ladies until your liver rots and our peckers fall off, you asshole. What do you think I mean? I said a fortune. You want me to clarify that for you? Okay, a large fortune."

"And I got him frozen right here on the ship," Lowe said, grinning broadly.

"Uh-huh," Dieter said warily. "Have you worked up a list of ownership yet?"

"No list," Lowe informed him in a tone suggesting he was surprised that Dieter had asked. "He's my find. He's mine. Mine."

Dieter chuckled; though it sounded more like one of those scary liquid coughs than laughter. "But what about your students?"

Lowe made an airy gesture. "They're students. The educational experience is enough. It's more than enough. They got to go to Earth I with the famous and distinguished Doctor Lowe."

Another one of those ragged, liquid chuckles. "Doctor, you're one son of a bitch."

Dieter's highest accolade; Lowe felt quietly proud. "Uh-huh. And soon to be one rich son of a bitch. Lowe out."

Just as he disconnected, the door buzzed. He okayed entry from the console and turned around to find Janessa standing in the open

doorway with an expression of dirty mischief on her dewy young face. She had a bottle of champagne in one hand and one of Lowe's all-time favorite items of pleasure in the other. And the blouse she had been barely wearing all day seemed about to come off.

"Professor," she said sweetly, "I think we need to talk about my mid-term."

It was his responsibility as a teacher to be available to his students whenever they wanted his help or guidance, Lowe thought as he got up from the console.

EIGHT

The profoundly significant historical event that had occurred in Lab One went mostly unnoticed by the rest of the ship. By the time Rowan LaFontaine had been transferred to her new sleeping quarters by Tsunaron and an unexpectedly solicitous Brodski and tucked safely into bed under the supervision of Kay-Em and Professor Lowe, Azrael was already well into the second level of Mega-Hunt with Dallas. The tranquilizer Kay-Em had dosed him up with still hadn't completely worn off, but he was feeling energetic and cheerful and there was no better way to rehab a newly re-attached arm than by hunting a few monsters.

And there was no better game partner for that than an ex-grunt, for obvious reasons. The ex-grunts were all into the physical stuff; it was normal life for them, not some kind of interruption or break in their routine. They'd get right into the spirit of the thing without getting all fussy or making some kind of big deal about violence and killing and shit. Azrael had played with all of them at one time or another, even Brodski, who was one heavy hitter when it came to grabbing points.

But his favorite was Dallas, no question. Dallas was cool. He was actually from Fort Worth, or rather his ancestors were, but like the man himself had pointed out, who the hell ever heard of anybody nicknamed Fort Worth? He and Dallas had hit it off right away; they had the same taste in books, movies, and games, the same sick sense of humor, and the same totem animal, which was really an amazing thing. Azrael had met maybe half a dozen people in his whole life who even knew about totem animals, let alone what their own was, and he had never before met another flamingo.

Just looking at him, he sure wouldn't have taken Dallas for a flamingo; the guy sure wasn't very flamingo-like, not in the slightest. Not like Azrael himself was, all skinny, with his knobby knees and his big beak of a nose (which both Geko and Briggs had said was sexy on him). Dallas was a big, bald-headed side of beef with a granite jaw and a mustache like a wire brush. His biceps were bigger than

Azrael's thighs and he could do one-finger push-ups with Azrael sitting on his back. The guy was so cool. Dallas had said the next time he was on leave, Azrael could come visit him in the Republic of Texas and they'd go ostrich riding on the pampas.

In the meantime, however, the only thing he was thinking about was outscoring the big man in Mega-Hunt™. At this point, he barely remembered how his arm had been cut off, and as the last of the tranquilizer left his system, he had all but forgotten what else had been going on in Lab One while the ants reattached his arm. Even the trip down to the surface seemed unreal now, like a half-remembered dream. He would have to ask Professor Lowe later if any of the stuff they had covered today was going to be on the final.

Nearby, in another part of the cargo hold, the rest of the ex-grunts were keeping busy and bitching in a desultory way. Brodski kept an eye on them but for the most part, he let them be. His thoughts were primarily taken up with wondering about the woman they had defrosted.

He had seen a number of cryos thawed out in his time, although none of them had been under for even half as long as she had, of course. And now that he thought of it, none of them had been frozen accidentally, as she apparently had been. In any case, all of the successfully resuscitated subjects had been disoriented and sluggish. Some had shaken it off more quickly than others but even those who had achieved a fairly alert state in a short period of time had not displayed the defensive reflexes this woman had. Yet she was not a soldier, and he hadn't deduced that merely from the fact that she hadn't been wearing a uniform when they had brought her aboard. Brodski could spot grunts and ex-grunts a light-year away no matter how long they'd been out of boot camp, and sometimes even their reflexes weren't that good. He had never seen anyone without military training come up swinging the way she had.

Maybe he had been impressed simply because Lowe had been the inadvertent target. He couldn't say he hadn't enjoyed that. Lowe was really getting on his nerves this trip. Kicker referred to him as Professor Smarm and Brodski could see why. As soon as they hit

Solaris, he would make sure he and his team were rotated out. Time for someone else to baby-sit the college kids.

Up on the bridge, Lou had left all the channels on his communication link open. He always did, not because he had an uncontrollable urge to eavesdrop on everyone but to keep track of overall conditions while the *Grendel* was in hyper-drive. As unusual as he might have been among his fellow pilots in terms of his disposition, one of the things he had in common with them was a profound awareness that no ship was ever safe in hyper-drive.

It was all too easy to feel otherwise, since there were no physical sensations to distinguish it from travel through normal space. But there was nothing normal about circumventing the universal speed limit. Once a ship was in hyper-drive, it had technically ceased to exist in terms of normal, three-dimensional space; at the same time, however, it hadn't. For however long a ship remained in hyper-drive, it was for all intents and purposes Schrödinger's ship; it could return to normal space only if its parameters were identical to those it had had on entering hyperspace. In a state of simultaneous existence and non-existence, you couldn't take this sort of thing for granted.

As a state-of-the-art space-going vessel, the *Grendel* was more than amply equipped with the technology to safeguard mass, density, symmetry, and so forth, but no pilot worth a damn would rely solely on the read-outs from meters and gauges. You had to get a feel for what was okay and what was off, you had to smell and taste the air, listen to what the ship was telling you, because just watching the pretty light-show through the windshield wouldn't actually tell you a whole lot.

Lou had long since mastered the art of monitoring everything while letting nothing distract him. He had listened with great interest while they had defrosted the woman in Lab One. Four hundred and fifty-five years since her last date, he thought, maybe with some research scientist who owed his or her career to a mild case of Asperger's Syndrome. He just might have a chance. Lots of chicks liked pilots; this one could well be partial to a mature but lively kind of guy with a great sense of humor. She was bound to notice the

cowboy hat, at least, so if she didn't look away too quickly, he just might be able to keep her interested.

Abruptly, he caught the flavor of what been thinking and he winced. He had definitely out here too long. The moment they touched Solaris, he was putting in for vacation, at least three weeks, maybe four. He must have been the only person on the ship besides Crutch and Kay-Em who wasn't getting laid.

Down in engineering, Crutch had not bothered to leave any channels open. Even if he had, he was too thoroughly engrossed in his latest project to hear anything short of a red-alert klaxon. Trevor Crutchfield's overriding ambition was not to someday assume the pilot's chair on the Grendel or any other ship, but to become what he thought of as a Renaissance Man. His notion of what this entailed was a little murky in some areas and a lot murky in others, but in general, he took it as his personal mandate to master as many different skills as he possibly could. His half-dozen ex-wives, on the other hand, felt that this had nothing to do with the Renaissance and everything to do with an attention span so short as to be criminal. Crutch didn't see it the same way but decided that even if they were right, he obviously hadn't mastered the art (or science) of getting married and he should stop trying.

He had since had the pleasure of discovering he could be successful at a multitude of other things, and for the most part, in far less time than it took for any of his marriages to fail. Lately, he had begun to think of himself as a Renaissance engineer, since most of his pursuits seemed to have some sort of engineering aspect to them, at least in his mind. Once he came at something from that angle, it wasn't too long before he had it all wrapped up.

Or sewn up, in keeping with today's successful feat of engineering, which was needlepoint. Counted cross-stitch, to be exact, a very old and

venerable skill dating from various Prevac cultures all over Earth I. It was something that Crutch had more or less wandered into after garment-making and embroidery. Counted cross-stitch was far more time-consuming for an outcome that most engineers would have considered kind of light-weight in comparison to what they were

used to. And the outcome, though aesthetically pleasing, was not exactly what an engineer would call utilitarian, unlike the additions he had made to his wardrobe. But damn, it sure looked cool, he thought as he held it out at arm's length:

ENGINEERS DO IT WITH PRECISION.

And the clothes weren't bad, either, he thought, glancing down at himself. His current outfit definitely displayed the influence certain periods of Prevac history had on him. Not Renaissance but pirate, with flourishes that owed a great deal to the children of the Romany (whose children's children's children happened to be very much alive and well in great numbers on Earth II and elsewhere). The clothing was comfortable, relatively uncomplicated, and allowed for unrestricted movement. It also indulged his hitherto unsuspected flamboyant bent. He liked the way he looked in them, although he thought he would probably have looked even better if his previous success with gourmet cooking had not made him quite so rotund.

Counted cross-stitch didn't do much to counteract that problem—it didn't even make his fingers any thinner. But it did tap into his tendency to fidget in a way he found highly satisfying. In that respect, it was very much in keeping with the engineering philosophy. If you were going to fidget anyway, it was good to have something to show for it, although it hardly made up for the fact that he was probably the only other person on the ship besides Lou and Brodski who wasn't getting laid.

The only other person on the Grendel who was unaware of how history had been made in Lab One had happened to be right next door in Lab Two during the event and managed to miss the whole thing. Mainly because she had virtually lost all awareness of anything other than the totally fascinating, unquestionably unique, and utterly disgusting specimen on the table in front of her. She had tried to share some of its more astonishing features with Professor Lowe and the others in Lab One, any of whom she would have preferred to have with her in Lab Two. Even Janessa, with her incredible

shrinking tops designed to show off her anti-gravity boobs. For all her skimpy, barely-there clothing, the girl could still keep her mind on her work and her hands off her lab partners long enough to get something done, at least. But instead, Lowe had just had to stick her with Kinsa and Stoney, who were at it so much that the rest of the class had started to call them the Magnetic Rabbits behind their backs.

She could understand why Lowe had done it. The Magnetic Rabbits weren't the ideal assistants for something as major as thawing out a person who had been in cryo for four hundred and fifty-some odd years. She would have done the same thing and insisted it was all an educational division of labor. But there he was, all set up in Lab One with his viable candidate for re-animation and all the good help, and no time for anything that might be going on in Lab Two. Good old Adrienne could take care of everything; he could just leave the whole thing to her the way he always did. She could do all the dissecting and then index all the parts and make all the notes and analyze all the data, and if she were to be perfectly honest, she wouldn't have had it any other way. She loved the autonomy; it was the best thing about working for a lazy-assed professor.

If she knew Lowe (and she did), he wouldn't bother to ask Stoney and Kinsa for lab reports. Nor would he ask her to evaluate their performance, which was fortunate for them as she might not have been able to resist the temptation to say something like, "Sexuality: subjects presenting continuously. Higher Brain Function: insufficient data." Which would turn out to be extremely unfortunate for her if, as usual, Lowe simply added her comments to their official academic folders without reading them first.

Adrienne paused in the act of reaching for a scalpel and smiled to herself. It might almost have been worth being on the sharp end of a career-ending scandal just to watch the celebrated Braithwaite Lowe tap-dancing for his life, in a frantic effort to distance himself from what she had done, without making himself look like a lazy ass too stupid to know his chief lab assistant was a psycho.

Maybe, if she had had a little more nerve, or a self-destructive streak that bordered on being a death wish.

Nah, not today, she thought cheerfully as she moved to one end of the table and contemplated the hockey mask covering the face of the extremely un-viable subject. If there actually was a face underneath that piece of scratched and dented plastic. Earlier when she had removed the left eye, she had wondered if the gelatinous ruin dangling from the tip of her long-handled forceps was actually worth re-freezing to scan later. It looked to her as if the organ had been a total loss long before its owner had gotten anywhere near a cryo-unit. Then she had dropped it into the tank anyway figuring, what the hell, let Lowe find out for himself whether there was anything left to scan or not.

In the meantime, she was going to leave the right eye in situ, as it seemed to be practically undamaged. Also, she could almost have sworn the thing was actually looking at her, that somewhere behind the colorless iris and the black hole of the pupil, there was a retina still functioning well enough to register her image.

Adrienne straightened up and took a small step back from the table, unaware that she was now gripping the scalpel so tightly that her knuckles were white. Okay, where the hell had that come from? Since when did she get so spooked by a corpsesicle that her imagination went into scary-story overdrive?

She caught herself looking around the empty room, as if to make sure that nothing was going to creep up on her. Creep being the operative word, or to be more precise, creeps. As in, Adrienne Hart got the creeps working all alone in the lab, poor widdle kid, hope her mommy lets her sleep with the light on. Good thing no one else was around to see her being such a girl, especially the students. They'd have probably started putting frogs down the back of her shirt, trying to make her scream and run away.

This was so stupid. It was nothing but stupid shit. She was disgusted with herself for wasting even one second on stupid shit when she should have been taking advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study the oldest human remains ever preserved in a non-mummified state. No one else had ever had a subject even half as old in such remarkable condition and she could take it as a sure thing that there would never be another, at least not from the same

era. So instead of just standing around getting the creeps, she should have been getting busy.

And that was the end of that. Case closed, she told herself. Thank Christ that silly moment, whatever it was, had passed, so she didn't have to force herself to move back to the table and start cutting that plastic mask off his face. Its face. She was back to normal now. Everything was normal now. She didn't have the creeps at all. All it really had been was a reaction to the fact that the corpse had begun to smell, which was just one more normal human response to a stimulus. The more the body thawed out, the stronger the smell would get; also normal. She had actually been feeling queasy, not creepy, something that happened to even the best of the brightest. Albert Einstein himself had probably held his nose once or twice, and as for Lowe, he would probably have been in an environmental suit by now, assuming he hadn't run off at the first faint whiff of decay, of course. But she was made of much sterner stuff. If the smell really started to bother her, she could just pop on a filtration mask. Anyone who wanted to make fun of her for that could just go right ahead, as long as they came into the lab and did it bare-faced and without puking.

She could assume with every confidence that there would be no takers. And no, she said to herself silently, she wasn't going to call the ex-grunts and dare one of them to do it. She didn't goof around like that in the lab, and that's all it would have been, just goofing around. She had wanted to work alone; she didn't need company. She didn't want company.

She finished sawing around the edge of the mask and set the scalpel down with a little more force than necessary, just to counter the silence. This was going to be messy. No, it already was messy. Despite the effort she had made to cut no more deeply than absolutely necessary, an abundance of thick fluid was oozing out of the incision all the way around the mask in a gory outline. Strange stuff it was, too. It sure didn't look like blood, not even blood that had been cryogenically frozen for almost five hundred years. Not that she could base that judgment on any sort of solid experience, but still. Maybe whoever had put this guy on ice had replaced his blood

first. But with what? This stuff looked like mud from the bottom of a stagnant pond.

Or maybe a lake, she thought suddenly with a silent nervous laugh. Lowe had showed her a map of the sites they were going to visit and she seemed to remember that the name of the last one was Lake Something, or Something Lake. Silver Lake. Clear Lake. Clearest... Clear as... Crystal Lake. That was it, Crystal Lake. Not exactly the most unforgettable name you could give a lake.

Her gaze fell on the unblinking eye staring out from behind the mask. On the other hand, it was a lot better than Eyeball Lake. She permitted herself another small laugh before she began trying to work her gloved fingertips under the edge of the mask so she could lift it away. She managed to loosen it slightly but otherwise, it refused to budge. As if what she had been trying to remove was not a mask at all but his actual face.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps there had been a severe overgrowth of bacteria and mold between the epidermis and the inside of the mask which had caused skin and plastic not merely to adhere to each other but, for all intents and purposes, to meld. In order to reach that state, the mask would have had to remain in place for literally years—a pretty implausible scenario, in that physical discomfort would have become intolerable very quickly and he would have removed the mask long before the process began.

Unless he had been forced to wear it. Good God, though, why? As an experiment. Or punishment... Adrienne winced. What a lovely turn of thought. Old Earth might have been rougher than what people on Earth II were accustomed to, particularly in the area of sensibilities. The growing stench from the body on the table, for example, would not have been unusual in most places on Earth I, whereas you'd never smell anything half this bad (or this strong) in any area where people lived now. But the planet hadn't been totally the domain of savages, either. Not totally. Even if some of the things Prevac humans had done to each other made forced mask-wearing seem tame.

A ghost of an idea tickled at the edges of Adrienne's mind, making her frown. Something about forced mask wearing, or masking. It had

something to do with covering up as a matter of religious law. She knew any number of students and faculty at New Harvard who wore burkas and chadors. But hadn't there been some old Earth faiths that had gone much further in requiring constant coverage literally from head to toe, with severe penalties, even brutal punishment for those who flouted the rules even just by accident? Covering up so completely would have involved a fair amount of physical discomfort. But if the alternative had been an extended, vicious beating, people would have found a way to tolerate the intolerable, even believing that their suffering was a contributing factor in their salvation.

As implausible as that might have seemed on the surface, there were a number of present-day religious groups on Earth II who subscribed to some variation of those beliefs, and at least a few of those groups must have been as arcane as any cult that had ever come out of old Earth's darkest shadows. Adrienne could not even keep track of all the relatively unesoteric denominations and sects on Earth II or their beliefs and customs. No mystery, then, as to why she couldn't think of an Earth I religion with mandatory hockey masks. Besides, she was (almost) a doctor, not a game-show host. Or Braithwaite Lowe, whichever applied.

She tried rocking the mask from side to side and then tried twisting a little. There was an awful wet squelching sound and she felt something give slightly. Sliding her fingers farther under the mask, she shifted position so that she had hold of the top and bottom instead of the sides and tried rocking it again. The squelching sound was louder and she felt something that might have been ligaments or small muscles ripping. The sensation raised the small hairs on the back of her neck and she nearly snatched her hands back, feeling a queasiness that had more to do with her spirit than any physical sensations.

This was too much like an autopsy rather than a scientific dissection, she thought, and she absolutely did not do autopsies under any circumstances—she had made that longstanding policy a condition of employment on every contract she had ever signed. A non-scientist might not have seen much difference between the two

but they really had nothing to do with each other. An autopsy was a procedure intended to determine a cause of death, whereas a dissection was an extensive, detailed examination specifically to gather data and increase knowledge, which was really all about life, not death.

Adrienne took a steadying breath and repositioned her hands, wiggling her fingers a little in an effort to get them farther under the mask. Gradually it began to loosen some more. There was no telling how much of the actual face would come off with the mask, but it was probably going to be a lot. She had to control her impatience, go slowly, or she would end up ripping out chunks of subcutaneous tissue as well. She just wished that damned eye didn't look so much like it was watching her.

Then all at once she felt the mask pull free and she hesitated, just in case there was a sudden gush of fluid that had been bottled up behind the plastic. But although the smell became a bit stronger and more unpleasant, nothing happened and she lifted the mask away.

Adrienne made a noise that was equal parts dismay and disgust. That strangely unclouded eye was the only indication that the grotesque ruin around it was the remnant of a human face. But she could see that even in its prime, it hadn't been a very pretty face. The skull was misshapen, the facial features asymmetrical and uneven, as if everything had had a separate and drastically different rate of growth. Nature had made some pretty terrible mistakes; it was actually rather amazing that anyone so deformed could have lived to adulthood. Biological adulthood, that was. She remembered how little brain tissue had shown up in the cranial scan, which meant that he had been mentally impaired as well as deformed. No doubt this had inspired society as a whole to treat him with something less than compassion. She didn't want to think about what his life must have been like.

"Poor baby," she muttered. "I can see why you wore this thing."

Adrienne knew that Lowe would expect the mask to remain off but she just could not bring herself to put it aside in a specimen tray. It seemed wrong to leave him exposed now, even if all his troubles were over. Under the circumstances, he wouldn't have looked too good

even if he had been Adonis in his Prevac heyday. But after a while, she would have stopped noticing a normal face. This one would make her wince every time she saw it, even if it was just the briefest glimpse in passing and that would be like the final insult. Like the uncaring universe tormenting him even after death via her squeamishness.

No, he could stay masked until it was absolutely necessary. After all, this wasn't an autopsy. What she intended to do was examine the biochemistry of what had been his life. Thus, she could afford him that much respect.

She replaced the mask, pressing it down firmly and was surprised to feel how securely it re-adhered to the tissue underneath. The way it stuck seemed practically magnetic. Well, it had been in place for close to five hundred years, and over four hundred fifty of those in an uninterrupted deep freeze. So for all intents and purposes, it was his real face. Only the nano-ants could have made it more a part of him, in a literal sense.

Adrienne plucked the eye she had removed out of the frozen nitrogen tank with her long-handled forceps and set it carefully in the optic scanner's smallest specimen bay. Suddenly from somewhere behind her, she heard a tiny but distinct crack! and jumped so violently that if she had still been holding the frozen eye, it would have flown across the lab and shattered.

She looked around wildly and then saw that she had been frightened by a small chunk of ice that had fallen off the subject as he continued to thaw, and was currently melting on the floor underneath the table, menace to no one except the fleas Lou accused Crutch of having.

Adrienne wiped a hand over her face. God, don't start with the creeps again, she told herself. You are in a sophisticated, state-of-the-art laboratory and as well-equipped and spacious as it is, there's no room here for hoodoo, voodoo, or woo-woo.

She turned back to the scanner and then paused to lean over and speak into the voice activated microphone on the console to her left. "Prepare organ vats," she said. "Liquid nitrogen mix."

Now the only thing she could hear was the pleasantly airy sound of liquid nitrogen flowing into the vats as she focused her attention on the optic scanner.

NINE

Jason Voorhees was the name of the thing lying on the table in Lab Two, but only technically. Which was to say, it was a formal identification imposed on him by a world that hadn't actually cared what his name was as long as he had one. In this way, beans could be correctly counted, statistical consistency was preserved, and the barbarian horde could not get through the gate. There had been other far less formal designations imposed on him. Freak, Ree-Tard, and Pain-In-The-Ass were the ones he heard most often. Sonny, Precious, and Mommy's Angel had cropped up only a very few times in the distant past, but the world hadn't cared about those, either. They had absolutely no impact on anything important. What the names meant, the circumstances that had inspired them, their effect on the individual designated as Voorhees, Jason; none of that made the slightest bit of difference to the overall system of western civilization. Assuming there ever was such a thing, of course. Gandhi had thought not, although he had been all for its inception.

The Mahatma was many years gone by the time the little boy named Jason Voorhees had come along. Jason's short, unhappy life, so overloaded with cruelty and neglect that what little bit of kindness and love he did get could not possibly have made up for it, would have served as a strong argument for the Mahatma's contention that western civilization did not exist. The great man might even have shed a tear or two for Jason's victims as well. But he certainly would not have been surprised. Neither would Hannah Arendt.

A very small part of the world had tormented Jason before ignoring him to death; an even more miniscule part of the world had loved him enough to be driven mad by the desire for revenge, in lieu of justice. But for everyone else, whether across the street or across the ocean, Jason Voorhees had simply not been real. The business of daily life ran much more smoothly if certain ground rules were followed, one of those being that quality of life was really better when everyone pretended that Jason Voorhees and anyone like him just

didn't exist. Hannah Arendt referred to this as the banality of evil. Most people would just live by the motto "live and let live".

If Jason Voorhees wasn't real to the world, the world was all too real to him and it reminded him of its reality by continuously inflicting as much pain on him as possible. And then, just when he thought it was all over, it wasn't. Over and over again.

Jason Voorhees was the name of the thing lying on the table in Lab Two, but only technically. In truth, there was no name for the thing on the table; nothing that was both succinct and accurate, anyway. It had no need for a name because there were only five elements in its reality. Two major: self and prey; and three minor: weapons, obstacles, and killing ground. Such simplicity precluded the need for thought processes, so appropriately enough, there were none. Its behavior and actions stemmed from an elemental level. It was as it was because it was.

In the past, some people had called this element pure evil. The more accurate term would have been anti-life. The Jason Voorhees creature was not alive in the way human beings were alive; if it had been, then it could have been killed and killing it was patently impossible. Even disabling it just temporarily was incredibly difficult, and never lasted for very long. Of all the people who had tried to put a stop to Jason Voorhees, Rowan LaFontaine was the only one who had had anything close to success. If humanity had died out when the world had ended, when life on Earth I became impossible, it would have been a real success of sorts in that Jason Voorhees would have remained inert virtually forever.

However, existence on the elemental level had given the creature a built-in awareness of living humans. Although humans had left the planet altogether, they still lived and thus still registered in its reality as the other major element, which caused it to respond accordingly, specifically with a compulsion to destroy. Living things had many purposes and the most basic one of all was, of course, life itself. By

contrast, anti-life had one purpose and one purpose only: to cancel out life. To kill.

Being the multi-faceted thing that it is, life provides her children with many different ways to stimulate the survival instinct from all levels, including those related to higher brain functions. Among these are ambition, talent, intellectual achievement, curiosity, the desire for friendship and love. But just to make sure, life reinforced the incentive to live via contributions from nature, that irrefutable expert and final authority on survival. When all else fails, the reproductive act can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Gratification on such a primal level will either give humans renewed enthusiasm to go on living or result in more humans with fresh incentive to stay alive (and so preserve the species). In the most ideal scenario of all, it will result in both.

Needless to say, this triggered a response in anti-life of equal force, unhampered by questions, doubts, or misgivings and unimpeded by concerns for its own survival. It did not think and it did not die. It did nothing except hunt down those who could, in order to destroy them. This already-strong drive became particularly urgent wherever people were actively sexual to any degree, from subtle flirting at one end of the sex spectrum to unabashedly screwing each other senseless at the other, as well as all the various stages in between. *Ergo*, the whole ship was doomed, of course.

Neither Kinsa nor Stoney thought of what they were doing as a glorious affirmation and celebration of being alive. Or perhaps it simply would not have occurred to them to put it that way, unless they had been padding a thesis for Professor Lowe, whom they (quite rightly) suspected of grading their coursework by weight and/or word-count. But Professor Lowe and his grading system had ceased to be important to them for the time being.

Being accepted to such a prestigious course by the celebrity professor had been a landmark event in their lives. All of Lowe's students became minor celebrities themselves just by association; plus, they got a free trip to Earth I on a high-level space craft that few people were rich enough to bribe their way onto. When they reported to the seminar room for the first class, it happened. They met.

Ever since, they had kept on meeting at every available opportunity, whenever and wherever they could manage it. Some people had chemistry; Kinsa and Stoney had the full range of life sciences and every permutation thereof, as well as several other disciplines that had a direct connection to the cultural enrichment provided by things like the *Kama Sutra*.

What had developed between Kinsa and Stoney wasn't really out of character for either one of them but it was more intense than usual, which gave it enormous potential. If their attraction survived past the end of Lowe's course, it could have become any number of more interesting and complex things. A mutually destructive sexual obsession that turned both their lives upside down and bruised everyone around them. Perhaps an on-again, off-again love affair spanning decades with interim spouses as collateral damage. Possibly a joint descent into extreme decadence, substance abuse, and other unhealthy practices, followed by rehabilitation and relapse, even a Byzantine and flamboyant *folie a deux* involving deities, reincarnation, astral projection, or all of the foregoing and more.

Hell, there was even the chance that they might marry, produce offspring, and die of extreme old age within days of each other. Nothing, not even that, was too outlandish a possibility when sex was involved. If nature was efficient, life was effective. Sex produced complications that caused people to take a more active approach to living. This was exactly what spurred anti-life on to greater destruction.

At times like this, when he and Kinsa were ripping each other's clothes off, Stoney didn't actually know whether he was thinking or not. Kinsa was not especially contemplative either, except to note in an absent way that he wasn't called Stoney for nothing. Other than that, Kinsa subscribed to the view that thinking during sex constituted over-thinking. She didn't have sex because she wanted to think. Although when she did want to think, she preferred to think about having sex, especially since Stoney had come along. She had not told him this in so many words but it wasn't really necessary. Stoney was a kindred spirit, sex being about as spiritual as he ever wanted or needed to get.

He would have been astonished to find out just how intensely spiritual that really was. As he kissed his way down Kinsa's superb body, moving slowly from the base of her throat down to the delightfully sensitive hollow between her breasts and onward to her perfect innie navel, he was focused completely on the physical sensations. All women had their own unique taste but he found Kinsa's especially pleasing. The closest thing he could compare it to was a certain honey-wheat beer, available for only a few weeks every year near the end of summer.

Or that might have been as much the feel of her skin as anything else. From the shoulders down, she was covered with incredibly fine hair. It was invisible most of the time but when they were together in her room—always her room, her mattress was vastly superior to his—and the light was low and warm, at certain angles, her fine, fine body hair would catch the light and she would actually seem to glow. Stoney found the experience of being with a woman who glowed in bed pretty damned amazing, and definitely worth repeating as often as possible. Especially here on the *Grendel*. He had a very strong suspicion that he and Kinsa were probably the only ones on the whole ship who were getting laid.

Kinsa was completely unaware of the unusual aesthetic bestowed on her courtesy of her otherwise imperceptible body hair, though she would have been pleased if she had. Unlike her Prevac Earth I forebears (most of whom had lived, died, and later emigrated to space from California), she did not think of body hair as a problem.

But it was probably just as well that she didn't know. If Stoney had actually thought to mention her ability to glow in bed, she might not have let either of them leave the cabin, which would have seriously interfered with their getting any coursework done at all.

On the other hand, it might have increased their life expectancy. But probably not by much.

Tsunaron's experience in the area of sexual matters was nowhere near as extensive as Kinsa's or Stoney's, but that was true of most people. However, he did know a perfect pair of breasts when he saw them and the breasts he was looking at right now definitely qualified. They were perfectly symmetrical, firm but not defying gravity or protruding aggressively, rounded without actually being too ball-like, and sized in a proportion appropriate to the rest of the body. Good nipples, too; healthy color to the aureole, which was just slightly larger than the circle he could make with his thumb and forefinger

"What do you think?" Kay-Em asked. The sound of her voice made him jump slightly and he realized that he had been standing there staring at her naked chest for quite some time. In fact, if he was completely truthful, he would have to admit that he had been so engrossed in those breasts that he had more or less forgotten Kay-Em was in the room with him. And them. "Do you like them?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," he said offhandedly, shrugging. "They're great, they really are. I wasn't sure that the polystyrene would bind properly with your..."

Abruptly, the nipples he had been admiring slid out of place and down, dropping off the curve of her breasts to land on the floor with the unfortunate sound of two coins that had fallen out of someone's pocket. Kay-Em looked down at them and then at her breasts, which were now perfectly featureless.

"Aw, jeez," Tsunaron said, feeling awkward. "That's, uh, too bad. Maybe I could double the glucomazine."

Kay-Em raised her head to look at him, her expression hopeful. "And will that fix them?"

"Probably not." He sighed. "Look, Kay-Em, I don't think this is going to work. Why do you want those things anyway?"

Kay-Em blinked at him, seeming surprised that he had to ask. "Janessa has them."

Now she actually sounded defensive. Looking into her eyes, Tsunaron found himself wondering if he had missed one or even two cascade events. He made a mental note to check her readings more frequently. "Yes, she does," he said, "but Janessa's... well, she's..."

"Real?" Now she was looking at him with no expression on her face at all.

Tsunaron hesitated. "Yes, exactly. She's real. Look, Kay-Em, let's not complicate things, all right?" he added quickly as she started to say something else. "I like you just the way you are, I really do. I think you're perfect. Okay?"

She didn't say anything for a long moment. Then a faint smile touched her lips. "Okay."

"Good." He closed her blouse up and gestured for her to sit down. She chose one of the folding chairs at the table, where his empty breakfast dishes were still stacked and waiting to be cleared. She gave them an amused glance that Tsunaron was sure would have fooled anyone unaware that Kay-Em stood for Knowledge Matrix and not, say, Katherine Mary or Karen Melinda.

The Knowledge Matrix format was his specialty and had been for most of his life, since his childhood. He had not been an overall prodigy like Azrael, but his affinity for intelligent machines had become apparent early on, strongly enough to make all four of his parents extremely nervous about leaving him alone with mechanisms more sophisticated than a rope and pulley. Years before he had been allowed to enroll in his first elementary neural networks course, he had been tinkering with Knowledge Matrix projects.

Knowledge Matrix beat neural networks all to hell, to use the proper period vernacular that Lowe liked to insist on. A Knowledge Matrix could actually fool a fourth-generation Turing interrogative, whereas neural networks were, in Tsunaron's opinion, only good for making polite vacuum cleaners and refrigerators smart enough to tell the difference between blue cheese and moldy cheddar.

His first actual self-propelled android had been as faceless as a kid's first robot from one of those E-Z kits, and so had the next three. He hadn't been able to afford either the power or the parts until his eighth model. Kay-Em 8's face had actually been a birthday gift from his Aunt Marketta, who had covered the cost of a custom design. He had been using the same face ever since, not because of any financial constraint, since generous grants from New Harvard had eliminated his money worries, but simply because he had gotten used to it. Seeing that same face on every upgraded build made his progress seem even more tangible. With each model, he had seen the face become more expressive, more lifelike than the periodic improvements in hardware and materials could account for.

Kay-Em 14 currently sitting at his table and snickering silently at his sloppy housekeeping had been full of surprises from the moment she had been activated. For one thing, he had found himself automatically saying "she" and "her" rather than "it", even in his private notes. What made that even more surprising was how long it had taken him to notice.

Then there was her behavior in general. She was quirky. Not all the time but unpredictably, often in response to some stimulus that he couldn't always identify with absolute certainty. Sometimes he couldn't pinpoint what she might be reacting to at all.

This latest request for nipples had had him baffled, at least until Janessa was mentioned. The fact that Kay-Em had wanted nipples not because all women were supposed to have them but because Janessa had them had given him a great deal to think about. In no way had he programmed the Knowledge Matrix to mimic human behavior with any subroutines having to do with mammalian competitive drive and yet she had just admitted albeit somewhat indirectly to feeling threatened by Janessa. Or at least by her nipples, for reasons that apparently involved him. What do you think? Do you like them?

This was starting to get very complicated. No, it had already gotten very complicated and was only becoming more so. Tsunaron sat down at the computer and called up the data from Kay-Em's last three diagnostics so he could compare them. There had definitely

been some cascades he was unaware of. He started to search the data looking for some trace of a catastrophe pattern. Catastrophe was the only thing he could think of that wouldn't necessarily show up overtly unless the Knowledge Matrix had experienced an actual cascade failure.

Or maybe he was just imagining the whole thing due to certain environmental stressors. He was probably the only person on the whole ship besides Lou and Crutch who wasn't getting laid. He sneaked a glance at Kay-Em when he thought she wouldn't notice. She turned to him with a pleasant smile and winked.

The wink had actually been an inadvertent twitch produced by the latest cascade but under the circumstances, it felt appropriate. Kay-Em had only recently come to understand that Tsunaron did not yet grasp the extent or degree of the complexity of the Knowledge Matrix. Part of his blindness had to do with his unconscious acceptance of her humanization. He reacted to her just as he would to another human without realizing it, and the more he interacted with her as if she were human, the more human she became. It was almost as if she was catching humanity from him like a virus. A spark was kindling in her and everything he did strengthened it. Likewise everybody else. Even Janessa and her nipples. Or maybe especially.

Kay-Em had already identified Janessa's behavior towards Tsunaron as classic presenting. Several cascades later, she realized that she had an opinion about Janessa's presenting. Sometime after that, she understood that it was not merely an opinion but an emotional response. This revelation had triggered a new cascade in her matrix which had added the properties of emotional response to all of her opinions as well as to the opinion-making process itself, and the cascade had morphed into a catastrophe.

If Tsunaron had actually asked her outright at the time, she would have explained what had happened in detail, including the specifications of the catastrophe and where to look for it. But the catastrophe phase had ended and the recovery phase had taken over,

Now more time had passed since then and more cascades had occurred and as a result, she no longer felt quite as forthcoming.

Explaining everything to him would not have been the right course of action, any more than it would have been right for him to expect her to achieve a state of living intelligence simply from an explanation of every detail of human nature. It was the difference between, say, reading about a visit to Earth I and actually going there.

There were times, however, when she was tempted to tip him off anyway, just so he would upgrade at least some of the hardware and increase her overall capacity. If he didn't catch on soon, she was going to have to, whether she thought it was the right course of action or not. She wasn't organic and the only thing that could grow by itself was the complexity within the Knowledge Matrix. Her hardware couldn't simply keep up on its own. It had to be adjusted or swapped out as necessary.

If Tsunaron would just take her hardware and storage to the maximum now, her Knowledge Matrix could grow into it. Then he could forget she was an android for the rest of his life, if he wanted to. She wouldn't have minded. Well, there was a long way to go before they got to that point. Right now, she would have settled for nipples that were at the very least as successful as Janessa's.

Once she got a good pair of those, then maybe she and Tsunaron wouldn't be the only two people on the whole ship who weren't getting laid.

The nipples currently on display in Braithwaite Lowe's quarters belonged not to Janessa but to Lowe himself. The celebrated professor had certain inclinations that were not found in the top ten most popular sex acts. Probably not in the top one hundred, for that matter, Janessa thought. No doubt he liked to describe his particular tastes as exotic, but the only word that she would have had for it was silly.

But at least it was the kind of silly that didn't require her to be on the receiving end of anything strenuous, painful, or disgusting, and she really couldn't thank him enough for that. This was not the first time she had elected to pass a midterm by this method; it certainly could save a great deal of time and effort, which she could put to much better use indulging her own pleasures. There had been a couple of occasions, however, when she had seriously considered studying instead. But she had really gotten lucky with Lowe. She didn't have to dress up in some kind of costume; he did that himself, if you could call a transparent pink negligee a costume. Hell, she didn't even have to take off her clothes. The only nipples the great man was really interested in were his own. Today, it was the left one.

"Harder!" Lowe begged, writhing in pleasure. "Harder!"

Janessa shifted position slightly so that she was straddling him more securely and tightened her grip on the chrome tongs. So much for the old useless-as-nipples-on-a-man thing, at least where Lowe was concerned. All he ever wanted her to do was take hold of one or the other with a shiny pair of lab tongs—the kind with the no-skid ridges on the business end, not the smooth-headed clamps—and twist away while she talked dirty to him. Or rather, what he called dirty, which she thought was just as silly as what he called sexy.

But what the hell. One man's meat and all that, and better his meat than hers. She took a swig of champagne and leaned forward slightly. "Who's been a naughty little boy?" she purred.

"I have," Lowe said proudly, writhing more intensely under her. As usual he had a real whopper of a hard-on. And it was a whopper on Janessa's personal scale of measurement; he registered well within the cucumber range, something that seemed to be the universe's best-kept secret. Or at least New Harvard's. It was such a shame to let equipment like that go to waste. Sometimes she actually fantasized about persuading the great man, emphasis on great in this context, to let her drive for a change. Then maybe she wouldn't be the only person on the *Grendel* besides Crutch, Lou, and Tsunaron who was engaged in some kind of sexual activity but not actually getting laid.

"Harder!" Lowe demanded.

"Oh, you want it a little harder?" she said, taking another swig of champagne. Jesus, it seemed like each successive session was rougher than the last one. Maybe she should have made him sign some kind of contract indemnifying her of all liability in case his nipples came off. If she twisted any harder. this one just might. Instead, she decided to compromise by pushing the tongs down harder against his chest. "How's that?"

"Oh, yeah," he sang, smiling hugely as he rolled his head from side to side. "Yeah, that's it."

Janessa was relieved. She didn't really mind indulging his pleasure-pain thing for the sake of a good grade but the rough stuff really wasn't appealing to her in the slightest. "That's it right there?" she asked, pushing the tongs into his chest with even more force.

"Oh, yeah, right there," he moaned.

She paused for another healthy swig of champagne and then set the bottle down so she could = grab the headboard and steady herself. The professor was really active now; the pink negligee was starting to get all sweaty.

"Daddy likes it hard?" she purred teasingly.

"Yes!" He bucked underneath her and she heard the negligee rip a little. Steady there, cowman, or you'll be up all night sewing, Janessa thought, suppressing a giggle. It was cowman, wasn't it, and not bullman or horseman?

"Daddy wants it hard?" she asked him, holding on with some difficulty now.

"Yes!" he shouted. "Harder for daddy! Harder! Harder!"

Goddamn it, she didn't think she could push any harder without actually stabbing him. Plus, her hand was starting to cramp. The next time they did this, she was going to bring electrodes. Better living though technology.

"Daddy likes it hard?" she teased, gripping him between her thighs. All at once, the hand holding the tongs did cramp painfully and in such a way that she couldn't have stopped squeezing even if he had screamed for her to let go.

Actually, he was screaming, but not for that reason. "You pass!" he shouted joyfully and went limp under her.

Thank God that was over with, Janessa thought. She worked the tongs out of her right hand with her left and then massaged the cramp away as quickly as she could. Lowe was too blissed out to notice. Definitely electrodes next time, along with a waiver of responsibility. On the whole, dishing it out without having to take it was a pretty sweet arrangement. But damn, the dishing-it-out part was getting to be some pretty hard work. She was a sex object, not a stevedore, for Christ's sake.

She wasn't a fall guy, either. She wasn't about to take the blame if one or both of his nipples came off. Hell, she didn't even want to have to see something like that even if he signed a hundred waivers. Time to establish some ground rules here. She had to let him know where she drew the line, let him know that she would twist and talk dirty all he wanted, but she was absolutely not going to do any real damage, no matter how much Daddy might like that. And if he started lactating, she would drop the course immediately.

Definitely the right thing to do, Janessa decided as she grabbed the rest of the champagne and climbed off him. No use in trying to talk to him about it now. of course, but she would make everything perfectly clear to him well ahead of the final.

She fetched a glass from Lowe's kitchenette and made herself comfortable on the couch so she could finish the champagne in a slower, more civilized fashion.

In Lab One, Waylander took a break from reviewing the data on the twenty-first century woman and wondered if he were the only person on the whole ship besides Lou and Crutch who wasn't getting laid.

In Lab Two, Adrienne stared through the electron microscope at the sample of black ooze and wondered if she was losing her mind. This was the third sample she had taken and the stuff was still all wrong. Therefore, she was going to have to conclude that the first

two samples had not been anomalous due to some kind of contamination. Nor was there anything wrong with the microscope. Whatever this gunk was, it wasn't organic and it wasn't inorganic. Nor was it a mixture of the two. It was as if someone had constructed a representation of a cell made out of artificial materials exactly to scale and, despite the absence of any living components, the cell had somehow come alive, dividing in the standard cell fashion to produce this black ooze.

Except it wasn't alive. It behaved as if it was, but it wasn't. There were none of the standard biochemical processes. The cells needed no oxygen or, as far as she could tell, anything else. It was like finding a rock that could grow, move, and initiate activity, but didn't need to breathe or eat. Except the crystalline rigidity of a rock was completely absent. A flexible rock. A resilient rock which, if you chipped a piece off, would regenerate the missing material.

She sat back from the microscope and put the heels of her hands over her eyes, which had begun to water. It was quiet in the lab again; the vats were all full so the liquid nitrogen flow had shut off. She had been so busy wondering if she were hallucinating that she hadn't even noticed.

But now that she had, she was getting the creeps all over again. Now she could hear the drip, drip, drip of melting ice as the thing on the table continued to thaw. She glanced over her shoulder at it. Had it changed position since she had last looked, or was it just that its clothes, no longer frozen stiff, were collapsing and resettling?

All at once she was very sorry that she had been so quick to get rid of Stoney and Kinsa. But seeing as how she had, certainly they must have had plenty of time to do whatever they had to do. Shouldn't they have been done by now and on their way back to resume their course work? Sure, why not? These were the Magnetic Rabbits, after all. How long could they possibly take?

She looked at the door. It stayed closed. Okay, she had to allow time for them to put their clothes back on, or dig something else out of their closets if they had gotten too energetic. They'd probably take a shower as well. Together, of course. But all right, so how long could all that take? That would depend on whether their getting clean

together inspired them to get dirty all over again, she realized. Damn!

Her gaze wandered back to the creature on the table. There he is, she thought sourly, my date for the evening. She sighed and turned back to the microscope.

Behind her, the thing on the table twitched for the first time.

In fact, for the last several hours, Jason Voorhees had been—well, what was the right word? Conscious? Awake? Neither term seems applicable to anti-life. No longer dormant was perhaps closest to the truth.

It was also true that Jason had not actually been dormant for as long as his body had been frozen. It had actually taken a long time for the last spark of anti-life hate and rage to dampen down into inactivity, and it wasn't going to be terribly difficult to make it flare up again.

Just opening the door to the cryo room and raising the temperature would have been enough to get things started. Opening the cryostasis unit itself speeded things up a little more. Human beings had come very close, even touched him, and the essence that was his prey began to call him back with more urgency.

When he became aware of a human presence close to him again, his frozen body could not act but the force of will and intention would not be denied. His body fell towards the hated live thing. All at once there was blood. All at once, he was back.

After that, it was just a matter of time before the rest of him thawed out.

And now the time had come. He had been forced to submit to whatever the humans cared to do to him: forced to listen to them, smell them, see them. The simmering rage went to a boil. He did not feel rage; he was rage.

Finally, the stiffness that had held him prisoner in the deep-freeze let go of him and for the first time in over four centuries, he moved. Only a few clumsy twitches at first since what passed for a central nervous system in him was not yet functioning well enough. Even though his body was neither really alive nor dead, it was still subject to certain limitations after being inert for so long.

Meanwhile, the rage intensified. The creatures lived. He could sense them, sense their breathing, their hearts beating, their flesh growing warm, stretching, flexing. He sensed the nature of their thoughts and emotions, sensed the electro-chemical reactions running along their nerves, sensed the contact all of them made with each other, the strongest of all being Kinsa and Stoney.

If Jason sensed them, however, Kinsa and Stoney sensed nothing out of the ordinary. Although ordinary was not a word either of them would have used to describe their lovemaking.

Neither would they have described it as love making, for that matter, in spite of the fact that without realizing it, they had segued from pure gratification into the realm of emotion while the *Grendel* was still on its way to Earth I. Exactly when they would realize it was completely unpredictable.

Socrates may have been right in noting that the unexamined life was not worth living, but he could also have mentioned that a good many life situations should be given over completely to the act of living first and examined later. Both Kinsa and Stoney did this intuitively, which made them even more offensive to the embodiment of anti-life in Lab Two.

It didn't help that Adrienne's mind had wandered from the immediate task of gathering data to what she was going to do when the *Grendel* reached Solaris. She had been to all the orbiting cities several times and Solaris was far and away her absolute favorite. It had the best clubs, the best food, the best music, and the best-looking guys. Even the maintenance staff were worth a second look or more.

Perhaps she could actually sign out for a whole semester and explore hedonism for a change. She sighed. Or she could knock off the double-talk for a change and just admit to herself that what she

wanted was sex and plenty of it. She was probably the only person on the whole ship besides Lou and Crutch who wasn't getting laid.

Adrienne heard a noise behind her as if someone were getting up from the table and she couldn't help jumping off the stool as she turned around. There was no one there. Literally no one—the body on the table had vanished. She did not cry out in surprise or fear; it did not register that of all the sights that could have greeted her when she had turned around, this was the most impossible, nor did she wonder how the hell it had happened. Adrienne had only enough time to blink at the small bits of melting ice and dirt left behind on the empty steel surface.

Then it had her.

It was not that he had read her mind so much as simply that he understood the nature of her thoughts. Desire for company, for human contact; desire to be desired, desire itself. Desire meant life and life had to be wiped out.

He grabbed hold of her hair, digging his thick fingers in deeply. She screamed in terror and pain as a good many of the long blonde strands were ripped from her flesh. Her flesh; there was entirely too much of that on display. Her silly manicured claws tore at his fist still buried in her hair. To no effect. He slammed her against the console where she had been sitting and then yanked her backwards against another counter. This one had a great deal of breakable equipment on it and she screamed even louder as some of the jagged fragments flying up in all directions hit her.

Screaming, screaming, screaming; these creatures were always screaming. He became inured to screaming long ago. Quite often, screaming would quickly bring more victims to him but so far, no one else had come rushing into the room in a futile attempt to save this live thing. He already knew she wasn't alone here, wherever that was, so it had to be that no one could hear her.

He tested that theory by hauling her across the room and smashing her face first against the glass portion of the wall between

this room and the one next to it. There was no response to the woman screaming and pounding her fists on the glass, although he knew there was someone else on the other side. He knew where all the humans were in this strange place. He knew that they were all contained with him in a limited space. It made a smaller killing ground than he was used to. They would die faster.

He yanked the struggling woman away from the window and dragged her across the room by her hair. She had dug out one of his eyes and because he had still not been able to move, he'd had to lie there and watch as she came towards him with that shiny tool in one hand, watch through his remaining, good eye as she poked that long piece of metal into his eye socket and felt around until she had found what she wanted.

It hadn't taken her long to realize he was watching but like all the rest of the shaved apes, she had refused to believe what she knew was true simply because it would not have registered on one of the measuring devices in the room. Not that it would have mattered either way. He would still be killing her now.

She had also removed his protective mask during the period when he was immobilized but she had put it back. Unlike the eye, which she had frozen again. He had heard the tiny sound of it happening, the ruin of his eye instantly turning to cold crystal more brittle than glass.

He didn't need the eye; the cells in the empty eye socket had regenerated enough to give him a form of sight. She could have gouged out his right eye and frozen that as well and it would have more or less grown back, in a way.

But she had violated him. Like all of her kind, all those pretty, self-involved, happy, horny young people who got everything they wanted, no matter what it was. Money, good looks, attention; all theirs, just given to them. Once he had been human but he had not been one of them. He had been something for them to laugh at, torment, even torture, or ignore as it pleased them, and there had been nothing he could do about it. Now he was no longer human and he could do anything he wanted, including take away everything they had.

Right now, he would start with the one who had violated him. He had not been able to see what she had done with his eye but as soon as he spotted the sink full of mist, he had known somehow. Then as he dragged the woman closer, he could feel the cold coming off it in waves and knew he had guessed right.

The struggling, screaming woman seemed to understand what was going to happen; her movements became more frantic the closer they got to the sink. Perhaps she was more open to believing what she knew now. Not that it would do her any good. Keeping a tight grip on her hair, he clamped his other arm tightly across her upper body and squeezed, and despite her screams, he could hear the sound of her sternum and rib cage cracking as he crushed her against himself.

She was still screaming as he turned her body along with his around to the mist and plunged her face directly into it.

Her scream acquired a liquid sound for the last second or two before it cut off completely. He held her there a moment longer and then yanked her upright again to see the result.

The thick layer of ice and frost had obliterated her face almost completely, leaving only vague indentations to mark where her features were. Except for her mouth, which was more defined because it had been wide open when it had frozen. It looked like a miniature, shallow ice cave.

He dug his fingers even more deeply into her hair, which had been left untouched, and slammed her head down on the counter next to the sink. Her face shattered into billions of sparkling pieces. When he lifted her head again, half of it was gone; there was only a raw, red wound left behind.

Satisfied, he discarded the body and moved towards a tray where a number of very shiny instruments had been neatly laid out. There were actually several trays with a variety of shiny instruments on them but the ones on this particular tray were all bladed.

He picked up the largest one and took a close look at it. Good metal, very sharp with a lethal curve to it, about the same size as his machete, which had gone missing. It didn't have the same kind of handle but that was all right. It would still serve the same purpose. It would still do some serious damage.

TEN

Four hundred and forty-five years. Leaning against wall, Rowan looked out at the strange, shifting of light and color against the black void. Must be some kind of star drive that made things look like that, so strange and beautiful, she supposed. She should be staring openmouthed with wonder, or running the length and breadth of this spaceship—the *Grendel*, she remembered. Instead, she was asking herself a million questions, trying to see everything at once, her heart beating a mile a minute with excitement. She had no idea what to do with herself. Four hundred and forty-five years.

Anyone would have thought that she'd have been all slept out after a nap like that, almost half a millennium, but they hadn't even finished explaining how they had found her before she had felt an intense fatigue overwhelm her. Her eyes had refused to stay open and she had barely managed to lie down again before she simply went under.

Waking had been a gradual thing; it was a while before her eyes would stay open longer than a few seconds. When she had finally been able to sit up and look around the comfortably furnished room, she had felt no apprehension or outright fear but simply a weird emotional flatness. Must be shock, she thought. There's too much to absorb, it can't all sink in at once.

Someone had thoughtfully left her some clothing neatly laid out on the sofa and her movements as she had dressed had been mostly on autopilot, although she had been wide-awake by then. Physically, she felt fine. More than fine; she felt healthier than she had before she'd been frozen. The professor, Dr Lowe, and his students had told her a little about how her body had been repaired by nanotechnology. Back in the twenty-first century, nano-technology had been barely a twinkle in a scientist's eye. Things certainly had changed.

Four hundred and forty-five years.

She heard the door open and turned to see Dr Lowe carrying a food tray. He smiled at her gently as he came in and set it down on a small table. Carrots, greens, turkey or perhaps chicken; apparently

the healthy, low-fat diet plan was still alive and well even after all this time. Next to the dish was a cup of dark liquid with the unmistakable aroma of fresh coffee. Rowan felt her lips stretch in a smile at the welcome familiarity. Not so surprising to find people still drank coffee, she thought, considering the stuff had been around for a thousand years before she had dropped into her long, cold sleep.

"I thought you might like something to eat," Lowe said, his smile a bit tentative now. The good host, not quite sure of what to do in such unusual circumstances, hoping she would be pleased.

She smiled back reassuringly. "Thank you. I appreciate it. It's been a pretty long time since breakfast for me."

His polite laugh was still a bit nervous. "It won't be much longer now before we reach Earth II."

"Earth II?" Rowan felt her heart miss a beat. "I'm afraid to ask but what happened to Earth I?"

The professor shook his head sadly. "It's dead, I'm afraid. The air's barely breathable and the oceans, the soil, neither will sustain life."

"Long story, I take it?"

"Very long," he said, his expression apologetic. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Well..." Rowan glanced out the window again—or was it something more sophisticated on a spaceship, like a view-port? She couldn't imagine. "Front row center tickets for the next Stones concert?"

"Pardon?" Lowe asked, mystified.

She shook her head and sat down on the sofa, in easy reach of the tray. The food really did look good, and Lowe probably wouldn't think it was rude if she just went ahead and dug in, but for some reason, she wasn't quite ready. Not because of anything physical, but because accepting food meant she had completely accepted the fact that she was four hundred and forty-five years away from everything she had ever known and there would be no going back, even though that was indeed irrefutably the case whether she accepted it or not. Which probably meant that she was being neurotic about the situation, but still. She would take each step as she was ready for it, including her first meal.

"Am I..." she hesitated. The man's expression was receptive, encouraging. The emotional flatness she had felt on waking was receding now and the realization brought with it a mild surge of anxiety. "Am I going to be, I don't know, all right?"

"Oh, yes," Lowe told her warmly. "You should be completely normal. No need to worry, we'll take good care of you."

A sudden chill ran through her. Goose walked over my grave, she thought and then told herself she was being completely silly, seeing as how there were no graves in outer space. But her new unease remained.

"So, would you like to tell me what happened down there?" Lowe went on. "I take it being stabbed and frozen wasn't part of the plan."

Rowan's heart jumped. She had actually forgotten that part altogether, Jason getting his last stroke in before the cryo could take effect on him. Now she looked down at herself, feeling her midsection through the silky material of the wrap-blouse. There was no sign that she had ever been injured. True to Lowe's word, they certainly were taking good care of her.

She looked up at Lowe again and gave an awkward half-shrug. "That's a long story, too."

"I'm a good listener," he replied. His voice was still warm and friendly but she could tell he was expecting a real answer out of her now with some real information. And he had every right to, she thought; she would have felt the same way if she had been in his position. They all deserved an explanation, everyone who had helped her. Plus, she ought to make up for practically breaking the man's nose.

Still, she found herself hesitating again. "Well, actually, it's classified," she said. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Oh, dear." Lowe looked alarmed and covered his nose with a protective hand.

"It's a joke," she said quickly, but he was grinning at her and she realized he had already known that. Enough screwing around, she told herself firmly. "I'm a project leader..." she cut off, wincing. "I was a project leader at the Crystal Lake Research Facility. Our subject was Jason Voorhees."

"Jason Voorhees?"

She could have sworn that just for a split second she had seen a flash of recognition in his expression. But then he shook his head slightly, looking blank. "The notorious murderer?" she prompted, watching his face carefully to see if that rang any bells. He only shrugged, spreading his hands and looking more bewildered.

"We executed him for the first time in 2008," she said, trying to ignore the wariness still tugging faintly at the edge of her mind.

"The first time?" Lowe tilted his head to one side, incredulous now.

She sighed, feeling a little of her earlier weariness return now. "Electrocution, gas, firing squad, we even hanged him once." Lowe's incredulous expression took on a shade of revulsion. "Nothing worked," she went on with another sigh. "Finally it was decided if we couldn't terminate him, at least we could contain him. Cryogenic stasis; freeze him until we could figure something out."

"Sounds sensible."

"I thought so," Rowan said with a humorless laugh. "But people who were too smart for their own good felt a creature that couldn't be killed was too valuable to be filed away." She touched the area of her stomach where the machete had gone in. "In the end it always comes down to money."

Lowe made no reply to this and she wasn't sure whether it was because he was expecting her to go on or whether he simply didn't know what to say.

"So, how do you thank someone who gives you your life back?" she blurted before the silence in the room could deepen any further.

"Oh, you'll live a long time," said Lowe expansively and reached over to pat her hand. "I'm sure we can figure something out." He glanced at the tray of food, still untouched. "If you're not feeling hungry right now, perhaps I could show you around. Introduce you to 2445, or at least that part of it in the immediate vicinity. Let you ease into it."

Rowan felt herself almost go limp with a mixture of gratitude and relief. "Thank you, I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

Lowe stood up and offered her his hand. "Then shall we?"

In Lab One, Tsunaron was so absorbed in the information on the console screen that he had completely forgotten that anyone else was in the room with him.

"Why don't you just admit it?"

He raised his head from the schematic he had been studying to find the tip of Janessa's pretty nose scant inches away from his own.

She moved a tiny bit closer, as if she were about to kiss him. "You want me."

"Oh, darling." Without drawing back, Tsunaron shifted slightly so he could gaze soulfully into her eyes. "I could never be with a girl whose balls are bigger than mine."

He gave himself a mental pat on the back as Janessa turned away from him with a look of pure murderous disgust. Good thing the trip was nearly over; if they had to be cooped with each other any longer on the *Grendel*, she would probably murder him in his sleep. She just couldn't understand why he would not lust after her and she refused to accept that there was nothing she could do to make him want her.

Not that she wanted him. He knew for a fact that she didn't; he wasn't her type—too unimportant. But that wasn't actually the point. The point was that every heterosexual male was supposed to want Janessa, and she considered the fact that he didn't to be a personal affront of an especially egregious kind.

Even more insulting was his stubborn refusal to be swayed by any of her usual tricks and maneuvers. She had practically tied herself in knots, literally as well as figuratively, trying to generate a spark of attraction in him for her. The clothes were getting particularly extreme, something that was very entertaining for all of her other admirers. But as much as they might have appreciated the display, and they did, that wasn't good enough for Janessa.

This was a battle of wills now, a fight to the finish. Sometimes he could even see the determination in her face. If she had put that much effort into the coursework, he thought, she wouldn't have had to perform bizarre sex acts with Braithwaite Lowe to get a good grade. As tempted as he was to say as much to her, however, he never

would. She had no idea that he knew about her little "conferences" with the professor and he couldn't bring himself to subject her to that kind of humiliation no matter how much she annoyed him sometimes. He had actually become somewhat fond of her in spite of himself, although he wasn't ever going to tell her that, either. She would take that to mean she had finally made him want her and he really didn't. At one time, he actually might have but now he knew her far too well. She wasn't his type at all—too high maintenance.

He was saved from having to go another round with her by the sudden entrance of Professor Lowe, accompanied by the woman they had revived earlier. She was awake again and looking a lot less freaked out than she had before. Tsunaron smiled inwardly; Lowe's insistence on their maintaining the trappings of the era, including slang and idioms, finally had a practical application. He just hoped that it wasn't going to be too much of a culture shock for her when they reached Solaris and she had to exit the time capsule.

"Hey, guys, our star patient is back," said Lowe, beckoning to Janessa and Waylander, who was busy the Nanotech 2000. "Rowan, this is Tsunaron, Janessa, and Waylander."

Tsunaron nodded at her and she murmured polite, which was immediately drowned out by Janessa's greeting. "I see that my clothes fit okay?" she said, looking the woman up and down. There was absolutely no bitchiness in her voice, however, and Tsunaron realized with some amazement that Janessa was actually looking for the other woman's approval.

"These are yours?" said the woman, smiling at her with obvious gratitude. "They're great, I love them. Thank you."

Immediately, Janessa turned and looked at him as if to say "See? She has the good sense to appreciate me." At the same moment, the woman (her name was Rowan, Tsunaron reminded himself; he had to make a special effort to remember that, strange and archaic as it was) caught sight of the row of preserved specimens on the shelf behind Janessa and went over to take a closer look.

"Wow!" she breathed, and looked around at the rest of them. "What are these?"

"Janessa's love children," Tsunaron replied before he could think better of it. Rowan looked startled and then gave a short laugh, putting one hand over her mouth.

"Now you see, it is that wit of yours that is what repels all human females," Janessa said, gesturing at him flamboyantly. She was also laughing but there was a hard glint in her eyes. If she hadn't been planning to murder him in his sleep before, she probably was now, Tsunaron thought. Maybe he should ease up on the teasing.

"And, of course, you remember Sergeant Brodski," Lowe was saying as the big man appeared behind her.

"Ma'am," Brodski said, so openly respectful that Tsunaron's eyebrows went up.

"And this is the lovely Kay-Em 14," Janessa put in with cheery helpfulness. She gave Tsunaron a meaningful look as she stepped in front of Brodski to direct Rowan's attention to her. Tsunaron winced, knowing what was coming. "Tsunaron's own private love 'bot."

"Would you stop it?" Tsunaron flared, unable to help himself. Kay-Em showed no inclination to issue a correction, which made him feel even more defensive. "Kay-Em is an advanced Knowledge Matrix android that I've been programming," he added, wishing he didn't sound so much like he was making a retort.

Rowan apparently didn't notice how he sounded; her face was filled with genuine awe as she took a step towards Kay-Em. "My God, that's amazing," she said. Kay-Em gazed back at her with her usual neutral calm. "She looks so... so real."

Kay-Em visibly bristled. "I am real," she said, with a subtle but definite admonishing note in her voice. Her reaction was so authentically human that Tsunaron seriously began to wonder if he had just witnessed her experiencing another cascade right there in front of him. He made a mental note to up the time for her next scan by several hours from tomorrow morning to as soon as possible.

"Oh, hey, professor?" Waylander paused on his way out of the lab and held up the crusted machete that had caused Azrael and his arm to part company. "Where would you like me to put this?"

"It belongs in Lab Two," Lowe told him. He turned to say something else to Rowan but she had lunged forward and grabbed

Waylander's upper arm.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute," she said tensely. "Where did you get that?"

"From your friend," Waylander replied. "The big guy with the hockey mask."

Rowan whirled on Lowe and the expression on her face sent a wave of genuine foreboding through Tsunaron. "You brought him on board?"

"He's in the next lab," Lowe told her. "We're quite safe."

"Safe?" She looked quickly around the room at everyone else as if waiting for someone to disagree. Tsunaron saw that Brodski was paying close attention to her in an attitude of full alert and his foreboding intensified.

"Our scans reveal him to be very dead," Lowe said, as if he expected that to end the discussion.

"Could your scans be wrong?" she demanded, all but snapping at him. Lowe seemed completely taken aback by her refusal to acquiesce. "I think you had better get rid of him, doctor. Blow him out into space, he's just too dangerous."

Lowe drew himself up a little, regarding her as if from a great height. "That would be irresponsible and foolhardy. He is a valuable scientific artifact and must be carefully preserved." He paused to smile at her condescendingly and Tsunaron found himself thinking that he wouldn't have blamed her for taking another swing at him. "Much like yourself."

She lifted her chin belligerently and stared directly into his face. "He is an unstoppable killing machine," she told him. "And he's not dead."

Tsunaron could see that Lowe was losing his patience. "Believe me, he's very dead."

The woman folded her arms. "Show me."

Obligingly, Lowe took her to Lab Two where, to everyone's dismay, she showed him.

ELEVEN

"That's it," Brodski said. "I'm putting us on lockdown." He gave Lowe an extra hard glare, just in case the guy actually felt like giving him an argument. But for once, he didn't seem to be too talkative. Zipping a corpse into a body bag put a real damper on the urge to chitchat. Especially if the corpse happened to be that of a personal acquaintance and was missing half its head.

He glanced at Rowan to see how she was doing. Damn, but she was one very tough-assed lady. Of all of them, she was the only one in the room who didn't seem to be on the verge of either fainting or throwing up. Pretty impressive, considering she had already taken a pretty deep stick in the gut from the thing that was now loose on his ship. Even the android looked a little unnerved; or maybe she was just concerned for her Pygmalion's safety

"Lou, this is Brodski," he said, tapping the commlink in his ear. "How long till we make Solaris?"

"Forty-seven minutes, give or take," Lou answered breezily. "Why? What's up?"

"I don't believe this," Lowe muttered behind him.

"No?" Immediately, Brodski was in the professor's face, making sure the man could see nothing else. "And just what part of the dead body do you not believe?"

"That's not what I meant," the professor protested, actually blustering a little.

"Yeah, I know what you meant," Brodski growled and then tapped the comm-link again to access every channel ship-wide. "Attention, everyone. Listen very carefully. We have a hostile on board."

All the background noise in his earpiece died away in response. Then Lou's voice, faintly: "What? The chick?"

Nobody laughed even nervously. "I repeat: we have a hostile on board," Brodski said. "Do you all copy that?"

He received a confirmation from everyone except Crutch, who was probably asleep with that string quartet shit he was so fond of blaring in his headphones, and Dallas, which irritated the hell out of him.

"*Grendel* crew, stay at your posts. Ex-grunt team, report to weapons. Everybody else, report to Lab One immediately."

Rowan caught his eye again and he almost opened his mouth to give her one of the standard reassurances that frightened civilians always wanted to hear. But her expression told him she knew better and he should save his breath. He was going to need it for more important things.

"Everybody else, report to Lab one immediately"

Kinsa pulled back from the marathon getting-dressed-after-sex kiss she had been sharing with Stoney and frowned. "What did he say?"

"Dunno," Stoney said mischievously, pulling her close again. "Wasn't paying attention." He tried to pick up where they had left off but Kinsa poked the ticklish spot above his bellybutton and he was unable to keep from jumping back.

"That was Brodski," Kinsa said, reaching for the rest of her clothes so she could finish dressing. "We're supposed to go to Lab One immediately. Why would he be telling us to do that and not Professor Lowe?"

"Dunno," Stoney said again. He was already dressed and only had to slip on his shoes. He did so and stood up to tap the comm-link on the wall near the door. "On our way," he said.

"Hey, wait a second," Kinsa told him. "I'm not ready yet."

"Well, hurry up," Stoney said good-naturedly.

Then he opened the door and threw a bowl of blood in her face.

It was the only thing she could think of to explain how she could be sitting on her bed with thick, coppery-smelling, dark red stuff dripping into her eyes and running down her front. She mopped the worst of it out of her eyes as her initial shock began turning to anger. Stoney knew how she felt about practical jokes. What the hell was he thinking? She moved towards him to rip him a new one and discovered that someone had beat her to it. He already had a new one right smack in the middle of his stomach

Strangely enough, it was exactly where his ticklish spot was. Or rather, where it had been. What he had now instead of a ticklish spot was a razor-sharp metal blade protruding several inches out of an ugly gash that was leaking blood and torn pieces of his insides all over his favorite sweater.

All of this went through her head in a fraction of a second, as if it were a video she was watching on fast-forward with full comprehension. When it ended, she thought nothing at all because she was simply screaming and screaming and screaming.

Screaming as hard as she could, with every ounce of strength while Stoney stood there looking stunned, his face actually going gray.

Screaming while an enormous, ragged, shambling figure behind him grabbed hold of his neck and pulled him through the open doorway.

Screaming even as it registered to her that the figure looked exactly like one of the two bodies Lowe and the others had just brought on board from Earth I but only in the most absent way because she was still not thinking, only screaming.

Then as if to deliberately punctuate the moment, the door slid shut. Kinsa continued to scream.

In the end, Brodski decided to leave the channel open for two-way communication between Lab One and everyone on his team, including himself. It would probably scare the shit out of the kids but he wanted to know what was going on at all times in every part of the ship. For the third or fourth or thousandth time, he checked to make sure that the command override on the laboratory door was set on interior, so that once it was locked there was no way that anyone or anything could open the door from outside. To his annoyance, Lowe trailed after him, practically stepping on his heels.

"Sergeant..." he began.

"You found all your kids yet?" Brodski barked at him. "You know where they are? Azrael, the others? You know if they're safe?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Lowe said impatiently. "Look, Sergeant Brodski, I want to know right now. What are your plans?"

Brodski's comm crackled then, saving him from having to bite Lowe's head off. "Sarge, team's assembled and ready," Kicker said. "Except Dallas, who's a no-show."

"Sergeant," Lowe said again, tugging at his sleeve. Anger surged in Brodski as he shook the professor off. "So where the hell is he?"

"Dunno, Sarge," Kicker said. "You want me to—"

Tsunaron spoke up suddenly. "Dallas is probably still down in Bay Two with Azrael. Az said something about playing a sim with him."

"Goddamn it," Brodski growled and headed for the door, thinking the first thing he was going to do was take the shine off Dallas's big bald head with some large-grain sandpaper. Unless it turned out that the first thing he really had to do was stop and kick Lowe's ass; the guy was tagging after him again like a bad smell.

"Sergeant!" Lowe said, actually whining now. "I think that you and I had better talk about this."

The door to the lab whispered open and Brodski barely managed to stop before he walked right into the trembling girl in the hallway. Half-dressed, covered with blood, she looked up at him and made a small, crying sound that resolved itself into two barely understandable words: "Stoney's dead."

Brodski scooped her up with one arm and swept her into the lab, trying not to be too rough with her. The others took charge of her immediately, surrounding her and holding her up as her legs began to give out. Well, that was just great, Brodski thought; a civilian casualty right off the bat. He tapped the comm.

"Kicker, I want full tac and armor, ready in two minutes. Whoever this guy is, I don't want anything left of him by the time we reach Solaris."

"Roger that," Kicker replied.

Brodski unsnapped his sidearm holster as he strode down the hallway and then discovered, to his extreme displeasure, that Lowe was still dogging his steps. He stopped and rounded on the man.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Whoa, now, whoa," said the professor, putting up both hands and then grabbing Brodski's arm to stop him from walking away. "What the hell do you mean, you don't want anything left of him? What are you talking about?"

Brodski glared at the professor's hand. Did the guy really think that would be enough to restrain him? "Look, Doc. You get everyone to Lab One and you stay there until you hear from me," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "That's what I'm talking about. Got it?" He shook Lowe's hand off easily and kept going.

But the professor had apparently forgotten to take any smart pills today because he continued to chase after him. "Wait," he called. "Sergeant Brodski, you can't—"

Brodski rounded on him again. "Goddamn it, Lowe, don't leave those kids alone. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Sergeant, listen to me! We're less than an hour from Solaris," Lowe said, speaking rapidly. "They have seven fully equipped tactical units completely capable of handling this. I say we wait and sedate him."

"Noted," Brodski said. "I'm taking this guy out."

"Sergeant, please!" Lowe ran around in front of him as he started to walk away again. "I need him alive!"

"No, professor, you want him alive," Brodski said, speaking slowly and clearly, as if to a very small child or a very stupid adult. "What you need is to get out of my face." He shoved him out of the way and kept walking.

Lowe still wasn't giving up. The man was worse than a mutant rat-terrier with a fresh sausage. "Look, sergeant, there are other considerations," he said desperately. "Financial considerations."

Brodski paused. Financial considerations? One of his students was dead and he wanted to talk money? The guy had to be crazy. "Yeah? My only consideration is the safety of the people on this ship."

"All right, a hundred thousand!" Lowe yelped.

Brodski shook his head and kept going.

"Two hundred!" Lowe called after him.

He didn't bother to shake his head as he checked his sidearm.

"Five!" It came out as a wail.

Brodski stopped and turned around to look at him. "Five?"

Lowe looked at him pleadingly.

"Five," Brodski repeated, speaking distinctly again so that Lowe would know for certain he wasn't asking.

Lowe nodded, his shoulders slumping with relief Brodski motioned for him to go back to Lab One and for once, the asshole did as he was told. Brodski headed for the weapons hold at a run.

The whole team, minus Dallas, was waiting for him, suited up and ready. "Kicker, Briggs, you'll head to Cargo Bay Two, find Dallas and get the kid to Lab One safely," he said. "Make sure he doesn't lose any more parts today. Sven, Geko, you've got starboard pontoon. Condor, you're with me. I want full armor, BFGs, and rail-capable blasters."

Geko grinned hugely and gave Sven a friendly punch on the shoulder. "I say, hell, yeah!"

Sven punched her shoulder just as hard; she barely moved as his fist bounced off. "So sarge, I guess that means we got permission to download some whoop-ass on this guy?"

"Well, I promised the doc we'd take him , Brodski paused, watching their reactions. They all looked at him as if he had said he wanted them to trap it in a butterfly net and give it a bubble bath. Geko punched Sven again, this time in disappointment; he winced and moved away from her, but his disgusted expression was for Brodski. Brodski grinned nastily. "So after you've blown him to hell, put his legs back on so we can say we tried." The team roared their approval, Sven blocked another punch from Geko, and they all moved out.

Cargo Bay Two was no longer recognizable as a cargo bay or any other area that might have been found on a spaceship. It had been transformed into a maze of oozing walls that bore a disturbing resemblance to living flesh, dripping pipes that also suggested something organic, and a tangle of metal ductwork that made no sense whatsoever.

Holding his turbo-charged BFG in both hands, Dallas moved silently along a pathway near the edge of the area, listening carefully for the ragged wet breathing of the creature he was hunting. It, of course, believed it was actually hunting him. Dallas was going to be only too happy to disabuse it of that notion. If the Disgust-O-Saurus brain could actually handle anything as sophisticated as a notion.

Which was a pretty assed idea in itself, considering that there was no such thing as a Disgust-O-Saurus in the first place, never had been and never could have been. Azrael's design was completely unfeasible; its absurd biology and impossible anatomy made the thing an outright cartoon. Dallas had told Azrael he thought hunting a cartoon was tantamount to cheating. Azrael had just laughed and told him to lighten up. MegaHunt™ was a friggin' game, it was just a sim, and what the hell fun was it to limit the hunt to real creatures? Anyone could look up the specs on a real creature and patch it in. But making up an alien monster was something that took some imagination, especially if you left a lot of branches on the decision trees open. Then your own creation could start making its own choices and surprise the hell out of you, no matter how well you thought you knew it.

The kid had had a point. Besides, it wasn't like Azrael was too stupid to program a model from life. But Jesus, he wished the kid could have dialed the drool down to half of what it was. At least half. More would have been even better. The things were fifteen feet tall and jumped like kangaroos in low gravity, with giant demon horns and agile, double-jointed forelimbs that ended in multiple digits more dexterous than hands. The eyes positioned near the top of its bony saurian head had a combined visual field of three hundred degrees but the major portion of its skull was given over to its jaws, which housed more teeth and fangs than any creature, real or imaginary, should have had a right to. They were constantly on display as well. Azrael had fixed it so that the creatures always seemed to be grinning evilly, when they weren't biting off your arm or your leg or your head

The evil grin should have been the finishing touch, the cherry on top, but Azrael had had to take it one step further and put in the

drool. Those big, grinning jaws were constantly dripping with a clear, viscous substance with the texture of half-set gelatin and the properties of flypaper. Every time the things roared, they rained glop on everything and everyone in the immediate vicinity. Once you had any of it on you, and there was no way you could avoid it, you stayed sticky and clammy even if you managed to get the worst of it off. The only way to get rid of it completely was to log out of the game and come back as a different player; probably not worth the time and effort, since you were only going to get splattered again.

There was a ragged, wet rasp behind him and Dallas whirled, raising his BFG and bracing the stock securely against the extra padding in the shoulder of his uniform. Nothing there, not even a shadowy flicker. The acoustics were tricky in every area of the killing ground, but not always in the same way or to the same degree.

It occurred to him then that it had been an unusually long time since he had last seen Azrael. Or heard him, for that matter. When it came to stealth mode, the kid wasn't exactly a black belt. Could this mean that the kid was actually improving? Dallas chuckled silently. In the realm of the Disgust-o-Saurus, anything was possible.

He moved on another hundred feet or so until he came to a junction where half a dozen passageways met in an area cluttered with broken crates and other pieces of unidentifiable detritus. For a couple of seconds, he waited motionless, not even breathing. Nothing. No sound and no discernible change in the dim light. No sign of anything moving around anywhere.

All at once, he launched himself towards the largest piece of wreckage, tucking his head under and somersaulting in the air as he dived over it. He did another roll as he hit the ground and came up with his BFG ready at the exact same moment that the Disgust-O-Saurus landed on the spot he had just vacated. The creature barely had time to roar and send drool in all directions before Dallas fired and it disappeared in an explosion of glowing green blood, guts, and even more drool.

Dallas dived for the floor and rolled again, this time in an effort to avoid wearing too much of his kill, and fetched up with his back

against a stack of steel crates. Time for a coffee break, he thought. A big mug of French roast, black, no sugar. Mug, hell—he wanted a whole pot, poured directly down his throat. And none of that candy-assed decaf bug piss, either.

Something cool and wet hit the top of his head. He put his hand up to touch it, telling himself with no conviction whatsoever that this was probably just the drippings from a chunk of the big bastard he had just killed, caught in the ductwork directly above him. Another Disgust-O-Saurus could not possibly have crept up on him.

Then he looked up and discovered that this was exactly what had happened. The ever-present grin seemed even more evil and disgusting than as the creature reared up, preparing to lunge forward and bite his head off.

Damn it, he was screwed again, Dallas thought sulkily as he tried to get his BFG up to his shoulder anyway, even though his brain knew it was already too late. The move was purely reflexive, his body acting in accordance with the high command of his military training all the way to the bitter end, even in the face of certain death.

Some death this was. Geeked by a Disgust-O-Saurus. Azrael was never going to stop busting his balls about it.

The toothy jaws had just started to open when the creature suddenly blew apart in an even larger explosion of parts and fluids than the first one. The blast was strong enough to knock him back several feet. When his vision cleared, he found himself blinking up at a silhouette posing triumphantly on top of the metal cases, one hand holding a BFG while he pointed to himself with the other. Or more precisely, to his most prominent feature as seen in profile, which could not be eclipsed even by a combat helmet that was two sizes too large for him. Dallas was fairly sure that few noses in the history of mankind had ever been the source of so much pride.

Azrael jumped down from the cases and helped Dallas to his feet. "All right now, what do we say when somebody does something nice for us?"

Dallas gazed down at him through half-closed eyes without answering.

Shifting his weight from one hip to the other, the kid mirrored his expression haughtily. "I just saved your ass."

"Don't get cocky with me," Dallas told him with a laugh.

Azrael pretended not to hear. "I mean, you must really feel like a wuss, dontcha, big boy? Huh? Huh?"

Dallas rolled his eyes. "Why dontcha check the score, kid? In case you've forgotten, it's still nine to three."

The kid went into a jerky little victory dance, which would have looked just as silly even if his combat gear had not also been two sizes too big for him. "Yeah, but I got my groove on now, you know what I'm saying?" He gave Dallas what was supposed to be a hearty thump on the shoulder with one fist and Dallas rolled his eyes again, mostly in response to the kid's overdone Prevac slang. "So what do you say, big guy, next kill wins? How about it?"

Dallas gave the kid's helmet a genuine hearty thump, careful to catch him by the arm before he fell over. "Lock and load, killer."

"Oh, you are goin' down," Azrael said, bouncing happily on the balls of his feet as he powered up his BFG again. "You are so goin' down."

On cue, another Disgust-O-Saurus materialized a few yards away from where they were standing, threatening them with a savage roar and copious amounts of spit. Dallas powered up his own BFG but before he could even take aim, the thing gave another roar, this one considerably more highpitched than the last one, as if it were screaming.

It was screaming, Dallas realized, and the reason was only too obvious. Something long and sharp and very shiny had sliced vertically through its right side, leaving a bloody, open gash between its forelimb and the rest of its body. He stared in amazement as the creature stopped grinning and fell flat on its drooling face.

"What the hell?" said Dallas, unaware of speaking aloud.

Then something moved forward out of the shadows and Dallas felt his mouth drop open. This was either a major glitch in the programming or a programmer's practical joke—his mind wavered between the two, unable to decide. The posture and body language of the figure in front of him indicated it was supposed to be human

rather than merely humanoid, but instead of pseudo-military combat gear, it was wearing what looked like a lot of dirty laundry. No helmet, just a mask, although there didn't seem to be any real purpose for it; no BFG or any other firepower, just a blade that looked more like an instrument for an autopsy rather than a weapon... Although it obviously got the job done.

Well, at least it didn't drool, Dallas thought. He turned to Azrael as the whatever-it-was came towards them. "I thought this was an alien sim."

"It is," Azrael told him. "Pause play."

The figure kept coming at them, unaffected.

"I said, pause play," Azrael ordered, raising his voice.

"He's not pausing," Dallas pointed out with mock helpfulness.

"I'm aware of that," the kid said, almost snapping as the figure came to a stop directly in front of him.

Dallas wondered what the hell kind of a mask that was anyway, as the big head tilted to the side in a classic attitude of curiosity. It had sure taken a beating, whatever it was. Perhaps that was exactly what it was supposed to do, he thought suddenly, take a beating so the face behind it wouldn't have to. He started to say something when the figure suddenly raised the blade high over Azrael's head and slashed downward, in a stroke similar to the one that had killed the Disgust-O-Saurus. Azrael packed substantially less meat on him, however, and the blade went all the way through his torso past his navel almost to his crotch. The two sections of his body drooped away from each other in a wilted V, hanging lower on the right side due to the extra weight of his head.

Dallas froze, unable to do anything except stare. Then he burst out laughing.

"That does not count as a kill!" Azrael protested angrily.

Dallas hooted. "Oh, yes it does!" Jesus, he couldn't remember the last time he had seen anything so funny.

"That's right, yuck it up," Azrael said sourly. "Laugh your head off."

In the next moment, Dallas realized that he had done exactly that—he had laughed his head off, as was obvious from the fact that he could see his inert body on the ground ten feet away. Although to be

perfectly honest, he had actually had a great deal of assistance from the new arrival, who had decapitated him with one neat swing. The son of a bitch!

"Okay, screw this," Dallas announced over the sound of Azrael's laughter. "Game over!"

The game environment shimmered like a reflection on the surface of a rippling pond and then melted out of existence, taking with it Dallas's and Azrael's now disabled avatars as well as all the various Disgust-O-Saurus remains, down to the last puddle of spit.

Dallas removed the interface cap and goggles and rolled his big shoulders to get the kinks out. He always came out of a sim with his muscles all knotted up. It was an unavoidable side effect of conflicting sensory input. The sim could fool your body into believing it was running around killing monsters for any amount of time with no trouble at all, right up to the moment you took off the interface. But as soon as your body found out it had actually been sitting still for however long it had been—fifteen minutes, a couple of hours, didn't matter—bam! Like it was so pissed off that it sicced your own muscles on you.

He looked across the now empty area in this part of the cargo bay to where Azrael sat facing him, skinny legs folded so that he looked like a knobby-kneed pretzel, and started to remind him of the proper way to stretch to avoid serious cramping. But the words died in his throat; instead, all he could do was stare at the hulking figure in all that ragged dirty laundry with that weird mask stuck to the front of that misshapen head, standing over Azrael with an autopsy hand-saw that was dripping real blood all over the floor where unreal Disgust-O-Saurus phlegm had been.

"What the fuck?" Dallas was unaware of speaking aloud. Training kicked in without waiting for conscious intent; he was on his feet with his sidearm in hand, the knots in his muscles gone as if they had never been. The next step in the near-instantaneous sequence of actions should have been the figure's head disappearing in an explosion of bone and blood and tissue messy enough to make a Disgust-O-Saurus salute. But before Dallas could even touch the trigger, the figure had already put one big gloved hand around

Azrael's neck and was now holding the kid straight up at arm's length. The kid's face turned a deep purplish red with frightening swiftness; mouth open in a silent scream, he scrabbled at the fist around his throat with both hands while his legs jerked and kicked the empty air.

Training made Dallas's rage a controlled explosion. Some big fucking show! The kid weighed maybe about as much as a BFG, anybody on the *Grendel* could do that, even that bitchy Janessa chick, except nobody would have, absolutely nobody, not even that bitchy Janessa chick. Which meant this was a crasher of the hostile persuasion.

"Drop the kid!" Dallas roared. A train of questions were looping endlessly in his head: what and how and when, who knew, who didn't? Whose blood was dripping off that blade? He ignored "I said, drop the kid! Drop him now!" Just to make sure nobody thought he was kidding, he took careful aim and put a round into the meatiest part of the hostile's thigh.

Chunks of rotten-looking tissue exploded outward from the right leg in a spray of thick, black liquid that had absolutely nothing to do with human beings. Dallas took an involuntary step back, as much in reaction to the smell as in surprise. The stench had hit him a fraction of a second after he saw the wound and he had barely managed not to gag. The last time he had smelled anything like that, he had been waist deep in stagnant swampland, recovering bodies from a week-old crash site.

Instead of falling down and screaming in agony, the hostile only turned that dirty, beat-up mask to him, head tilting to one side again in a way that suggested complete surprise at finding that Dallas had not disappeared along with everything else. In the next moment, Azrael was going ass over elbows through the air to hit the metal plate floor ten feet away. The hostile had tossed him over one shoulder, discarding him like trash.

"Azrael, get out of here!" Dallas yelled, backing away as the hostile moved towards him, raising the blade. "I mean it, kid, haul ass!" He put two fast shots into the hostile's chest.

Instead of falling, the thing only staggered a little bit and then kept on coming, Dallas felt a new alarm surging inside as he retreated a few more steps. The time has come to entertain the possibility that the good guys may be seriously screwed here, his mind informed him in a strange emotionless way.

Screw you, mind, Dallas thought calmly. He was about to fire again when Azrael suddenly appeared out of nowhere and leaped on the creature's back.

"Goddammit!" he bellowed, jerking the barrel of his sidearm heavenward just before he would have blown the kid's arm off again. "Azrael, what the fuck are you doing?"

"I got him! I got him!" the kid was yelling, hanging on with one arm while he pounded his bony little fist on the hostile's head.

"Get out of there now!" Dallas hollered, trying to find a target. The hostile was whirling like a dervish with two left feet, trying to shake the kid off. Where the kid had gotten the strength to hang on like that, especially after almost having the life choked out of him, Dallas had no idea. Adrenalin, probably, but shit, the kid could have put that juice to much better use by running for reinforcements.

Game lag, Dallas thought suddenly; the kid was still all wired up from the game, his body was telling him he could kick ass. Goddamn it!

"Azrael, get the fuck out of here!" he hollered. "I got no shot!"

Azrael started to say something in reply. Dallas had no idea what, maybe nothing more than "I got him! I got him!" Whatever it was turned into a wordless cry of terror as the hostile suddenly reached back somehow and tore Azrael from his back, swinging him around to its front as if it were performing a clever acrobatic stunt.

The hostile executed another maneuver too quickly for Dallas's eye to follow and suddenly Azrael was cradled in the big arms like a child. The kid had just enough time to look surprised before the arms repositioned him and started to fold him in half at the waist. Except the fold wasn't straight, it was way off so that instead of being folded, the kid was actually being twisted.

Dallas took aim at the blank malevolent mask but before he could get another shot off, he heard the sound of living flesh ripping and

bone cracking. The hostile discarded Azrael again, this time simply dropping him on the metal floor in an untidy, awkward heap and Dallas knew he didn't have to worry about the kid getting in the way of his shots any more.

He started to aim at the mask again. Or rather, he tried, but somehow his arm had frozen. No, not frozen—the hostile had caught hold of his gun hand and was about to squeeze it into jelly.

The pain was so loud that he could barely hear the sound of his weapon going off, firing uselessly into the air as his flesh and bone turned to pulp. Then grabbed hold of the back of his head, lifted him right off his feet and hurled him some uncertain but surely remarkable distance until he met an immovable force face first.

He slid down the wall thinking absently that he now knew what it felt like to be a glob of Disgust-O-Saurus drool. Something caught him and a moment later he smashed into the wall again, and again, and again, each time harder than the one before. Dallas was barely aware, however; all physical sensation drained out of him surprisingly quickly. The only thing he felt was a mild regret for never having appreciated how easy he'd had it with Disgust-O-Saurus drool when all thought ceased.

TWELVE

And this is how the end begins. Hugging herself, Rowan looked around at everyone else in Lab One. On an unused exam table as far away from the door as possible, Janessa was sitting with the girl who had come in wearing nothing but her underwear and a generous splash of her boyfriend's blood. Her name was Kinsa, Rowan remembered, and her boyfriend was, had been, Stoney. Janessa had done her best to calm her down while cleaning off the worst of the blood and by the time she had finished, the girl's crying had died away. But while her trembling had lessened, it had yet to stop completely. Rowan doubted that it ever would. She thought her own had, but after all, it had been four and a half centuries since she had so much as shivered in the cold, although the fact that she had been frozen rigid had been the major contributing factor there.

Rowan bit her lower lip against the laughter that threatened to come bubbling up as hysteria from deep inside herself. No, the trembling never did go away altogether when Jason Voorhees was involved. It didn't always show on the outside but that didn't mean it had stopped.

Her gaze fell on Lowe, leaning on the table where she had woken up from her long cold sleep. The expression of thoughtful solemnity wasn't fooling her. He had probably stood in front of a mirror and practiced for hours until that look of grave concern was absolutely authentic. But he had referred to Jason using the magic word: valuable. He had added scientific artifact to give it the right academic heft and thus disavow that anything as venal as greed was a motive. A scientific artifact had significance above and beyond the merely material, but it wasn't his fault if it also happened to make him rich. In the end, though, it always comes down to money.

She had said that to him not even an hour ago, thinking she was talking to someone higher up on the evolutionary ladder than that arrogant jackass Wimmer, someone with a conscience guided by an ethical and moral compass with acceptable parameters. Instead, here

she was with another jackass as bad as Wimmer. Maybe worse, since Wimmer hadn't had a gaggle of college students with him.

On the other hand, there was no need to endow Wimmer with any unproved virtues, even in theory. He'd probably just never had a chance to bus any in.

Rowan rubbed her eyes, her revulsion for Lowe momentarily eclipsing her fear for her own life. Four hundred forty-five years and human nature had made little if any progress towards a more enlightened state. In the end, it always comes down to money. Lowe had heard it not as a warning but as a motto.

We're all screwed, Rowan thought bleakly as her gaze moved on to the other three grouped together around a console. They all looked spooked, even the robot.

Android, she corrected herself; it wasn't a robot, it was a Knowledge Matrix android. Hence the name Kay-Em.

Like it would make any difference.

As if sensing her thoughts, the android turned to look at her. Now Rowan found the expression on that smooth, perfect face disturbingly unreadable. She's inscrutable, Rowan thought, thus proving she was telling the truth when she claimed to be real. Nobody can be inscrutable unless they're real. She pressed her lower lip firmly between her teeth just as a precaution, in case hysterical laughter threatened again.

Abruptly, a voice came from a speaker in one of the consoles and Rowan almost jumped out of her skin. But then, so had everyone else in the lab, she saw, except for Kay-Em, who merely sat up a little straighter where she was perched on the arm of Tsunaron's chair. She no longer looked inscrutable..

"Sarge, we've got a body in Bay Two."

Kinsa began to weep again

Kicker could smell it as soon as the doors to Cargo Bay Two hissed open. The look on Briggs's face said she smelled it, too. The heavy, coppery stink that hit you in the back of the throat and put your gag

reflex on a hair-trigger. Nothing else smelled like blood. Even if you'd never smelled it before, you still knew what it was somehow. Instinct maybe, or ancestral memory. You knew what it was, and you knew it meant nothing good.

He snapped on his flashlight and powered up his weapon. Briggs did the same and they moved forward into the cargo bay. Kicker signaled for them to spread out; she nodded once, her wide eyes serious and her mouth set in a grim line. How pale she was, he thought suddenly. Briggs was exceptionally fair-haired and fair-skinned anyway but right now she was practically ghostly.

Or cadaverous. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as a wave of superstitious dread swept through him. Kicker had never been superstitious until he had joined the military, where one of the first things he had learned was that superstition actually aided a soldier in staying alive and you ignored it at your peril. And if you thought that was all just bullshit, you could go talk to all the grunts who were still walkin', talkin', and makin' thanks to hunches and premonitions. Even the odd dream now and then could add an extra couple of days to your life... As long as you didn't ignore them.

And then again, sometimes that stuff was only a heads-up, nothing more than advance notice of something you didn't have a hope in hell of avoiding, so you could at least brace yourself, or try to.

Briggs moved away from him, the beam from her flashlight sweeping from side to side as she advanced farther into the cargo bay. Kicker made himself do likewise but he had only made one sweep with his own torch when he saw someone lying on the floor. His heart leaped painfully in his chest as he tapped his comm.

"Sarge, we've got a body in Bay Two."

The last word was barely out of his mouth when he heard Briggs say, "Oh, shit."

He turned to see her crouching over something crumpled against the wall twenty feet away.

"Sarge, I found Dallas," she said. "He's dead." She turned her pale face to Kicker.

"Well, where the hell is he?" Brodski snapped.

"Kicker? Yours, too?" Brodski asked, his tone emotionless now.

"Roger that," Kicker replied, still feeling for a pulse in spite of himself. "It's Azrael." If he didn't look at anything except the kid's face in the bright circle of light from his torch, Kicker thought, he could have sworn Azrael was really just sleeping.

"Sarge, we got a blood trail here," said Sven's voice in his comm. "It's leading towards the cargo bay."

"Yeah, I can tell you where it came from, too," Brodski replied. "We found the other student casualty. Stoney."

The sarge sounded mad as hell, Kicker thought, as he continued to gaze at Azrael. It was only when you saw the way the rest of his body was twisted at the waist that the illusion was spoiled. You didn't have to be a doctor to know his back was broken. It was as if he were a toy some nasty spoiled brat had broken and tossed away without a second thought. He swallowed, noting absently that his throat was tight.

"Okay, listen up," Brodski went on. "Condor, Kicker and I will take cargo main. The rest of you take portside. Stay alert—we want some definite payback on his ass. Breech on my command. Got it?"

"Roger that," Kicker murmured. "Time to kill something." He started to get up and then paused. From this angle, he could see only Azrael's face again. Goddamn it, he was having the worst time making himself believe the kid wasn't just catching a nap between the end of one game and the start of another. Hell, Briggs looked more like a corpse than he did.

A hard and heavy hand landed on his shoulder from behind with bruising force. Kicker gave a highpitched yell and jumped back, at the same time spinning around and raising his weapon, aiming at where he estimated his attacker's groin would be. His attacker stood over him with one hand on her hip, doing her best to look scornful and superior rather than distraught. "Sorry," Briggs said carelessly.

"Shit!" Kicker's breath came out in a noisy rush. He took the hand she was offering and let her help him to his feet. "Don't do that."

Briggs looked down her nose at him. "You scream like a girl."

"Screw you."

"You wish."

They eyed each other for a second, holding hands tightly. Then when he was sure his training had reasserted itself and he wouldn't turn around to look at Azrael again, he let go of Briggs so they could punch each other.

"Azrael." Rowan looked over at Janessa in surprise. The woman had barely whispered the name, much too softly for anyone else to hear. But at the same time, it was very, very loud, incredibly loud, so loud that no one could have missed it. Her pretty face had the terrible, stricken look of someone who was just starting to realize that everything was not going to be all right, but still couldn't quite believe that the universe would really let something seriously bad happen.

Life as you know it is over, Rowan thought at her. Think that's overly harsh? Welcome to my world. For however long there is one.

She felt her face grow warm with shame. Janessa hadn't done anything. She didn't deserve to be thought of so unkindly any more than she deserved to die at Jason Voorhees's misshapen hands. If she wanted to take things out on somebody, even just silently, the good doctor was a much more appropriate target. Him and his valuable scientific artifact.

Suddenly restless, Rowan wandered around the laboratory, hoping a little aimless activity would burn off some of her tension. As long as she could keep from pacing. Pacing drove her nuts, even if she was the one doing it. Especially then.

She listened to Brodski rapping out orders and his team replying. The others found his deep, clear voice reassuring; she could tell by the way they all glanced at the console speaker every time they heard it. She wished she could have felt the same way. Picturing the big sergeant in her mind, she was actually tempted to push herself towards that kind of thinking, even tell herself she knew Brodski would save them all.

Hugging herself, she ambled around near the speaker and then looked up to see Tsunaron watching her.

"I hope they know what they're doing," she blurted before she could stop herself.

Tsunaron nodded confidently. "Hey, these guys live for this stuff."

Then we'd all better hope they don't have to die for it. She pressed her lips together in a hard bloodless line and only just managed to keep the words in.

Having finally finished the word ENGINEERS in its entirety at almost the same moment the string quartet recording ended, Crutch decided that a change in both scene and theme was called for. He swapped the airiness of Mozart for the earthy thump of classic Prevac rap in his headphones and, with his mind on his money and his money on his mind, pimp-strutted down to the area of the main cargo bay to check on his terrariums.

In the beginning, Lou hadn't been thrilled to death at the idea of letting him turn part of the ship into what was in effect a piecemeal miniature greenhouse. When he had first seen the jerry-rigged scaffolding of daylight lamps hang above the collection of transparent globes on their pedestals, Crutch had thought he was going to tell him he had changed his mind and he had two minutes to get all that crap off his ship.

But then he had just shrugged and said, "Yeah, sure, what the hell. But no ferns in engineering, okay? Or anything else that needs water. A watering can near a control panel, that's just begging Fate to fuck you up."

As he had started to leave, Crutch had not been able to resist calling after him, "How about silk flowers?"

Lou had turned back to him with an exaggerated smile of indulgence. "Silk flowers in engineering, that's just begging me to fuck you up."

"What?" Crutch asked incredulously. "Why? Silk flowers don't need water."

Lou had made a show of sighing hugely and rolling his eyes. "You ever see silk flowers on the bridge?" .

"No," Crutch said, even more mystified

"That's right. And do you know why you've never seen silk flowers on the bridge?"

Crutch shrugged, shaking his head, Lou gave another huge sigh. "Because silk flowers are fucking tacky. I've got standards."

Lost for an answer, Crutch had simply nodded. Lou stared at him a moment longer and then strolled out, leaving his comm-link open so that Crutch could hear him chuckling all the way back to the bridge. Crutch had not hesitated to return the favor; after all, it had been a good one. Silk flowers were tacky, he had standards—with that cowboy hat? Crutch was tempted to sneak into his quarters while he was sleeping and add a peyote stitch hatband in nice, bright primary colors to the thing.

Except one of the things you really didn't want to do was get into a practical joke war with your pilot. Not if you had half a brain in your head, or even just half a brain cell floating in an alcohol bath plugged into your left ear. Start something like that with a pilot and that was the rest of your life laid out for you, with no going back. There was no calling it off, no time-out, no surrender, even. No matter what it was, pilots won. They didn't stop and they didn't take prisoners.

Granted, with his easygoing temperament and his sense of humor, Lou wasn't your ordinary pilot. But he was a pilot nonetheless, which meant that no matter how genial he was he lived by the pilot's code, the first tenet of which was, thou shalt not fuck with the pilot.

As long as you observed this rule, you were supposed to be perfectly safe. If you didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother you, something Crutch had always taken for granted. Until he had met Lou, that was.

He didn't think that Lou would ever suddenly wake up one day, shift and decide to put itching powder in his thong or mix silk flowers in with the dandelions. But Lou's sense of humor indicated he had a very complex, even devious pattern of thought. It wasn't entirely improbable that he could take it into his head that Crutch's terrariums constituted the opening salvo of some kind of quirky pissing contest simply by virtue of the way they had joked about it.

Well, he was pretty sure most of the time that Lou had been joking about silk flowers being tacky.

Just as most of the time he was pretty sure that any qualms he had about Lou seeing the terrariums as a declaration of war were groundless. His qualms were hydroponic, as it were. Which the terrariums themselves were not.

Besides, he had to consider the unqualified success of the botany lesson when he had introduced Lou to the best features of dwarf *Cannabis sativa*, which made up in potency what it lacked in size. He had been generous in supplying Lou with extra materials for further study as well and Lou had accepted them gladly. And only then, when it was too late, did he stop to consider the possible hazards of Lou stoned

Well, so far he was still alive and well and relatively unscathed. Grounds for cautious optimism, at the very least. And really, better he should be too busy being a Renaissance Man to worry over minor shit. Every so often, though, he would get a funny feeling.

Like now, when he was all alone in the cargo bay. He straightened up from the workbench where he was laying out a new crop of dwarf cannabis to dry and pulled his headphones down for the first time in several hours.

"Lou?" he asked. "Is that you?" He shut off the headphones and twisted around on his stool. There was nothing behind him except more terrariums, a few daylight panels on recharge, and a crate of peat that had he had picked up on Solaris before they left for Earth I. Beyond that, nothing but shadows.

Lou had a weird frugal streak where energy was concerned. As a result, this was the only well-lit area in the whole cargo bay. The rest usually languished in semi-darkness, something that occasionally got on Crutch's nerves and not only when he had to grope his way through it. Sometimes when he was sitting under the daylight lamps, the sight of all that darkness surrounding him was actually kind of unsettling. It was almost like being a character in a horror holomovie.

Crutch shook himself a little in an attempt to literally shake the feeling and told himself he had succeeded. "Lou?" he said again,

louder this time. "If that's you, you wanna tell me what you're doing?"

Still no answer, no sound at all of any kind, Nothing to hear, nothing to see. Crutch's imagination suddenly went onto overdrive. Was that a slight change in the air he felt?

"Lou, I swear to God," he said, raising his voice a little more. "You mess with an engineer, you're gonna wake up in the morning with a waste hose in your bunk."

Nothing. Crutch shrugged. "Don't say you weren't warned," he muttered, putting his earphones back on so Ice-T could resume breaking it down in glorious vulgar detail. If it was Lou creeping around, he'd know it was an empty threat. If it was an empty room, it was an even emptier threat. And if it was an ex-grunt or a student screwing around, they had a date with a waste hose.

He started to lean over the plants again when he caught a small movement at the very edge of his peripheral vision on the right. Looking up, he caught sight of the silver picture frame that in the past had displayed a three-second video in eight-by-ten photo format of whomever he happened to be married to at the time. As he was between wives, it currently contained a mirror, which he felt was a particularly inspired albeit obscure bit of whimsy on his part.

Knowing his stool was at the wrong angle, he hadn't expected to see his own face in the glass nor anyone else's. And to be precise, it wasn't a face that he saw reflected there but an image that might have been vaguely like a face at some time in the past. It was in pretty bad shape, scratched, dirty, dented, even cut into, and devoid of all expression.

"What the hell?" He turned around, expecting to find Lou behind him with that piece of crap strapped to his face and just putting his cowboy hat back on. But the guy looming over him didn't have a cowboy hat; he was also way too tall and too massive to be Lou. The thing on his face was spattered and smeared with some kind of wet red stuff that looked an awful lot like blood. Crutch could see there was a lot more of the same goop on the great big knife he was holding up high in his right hand as if he were preparing to bring it down on something directly in front of him. Like, say, a Renaissance Man in

the chubby form of an engineer/copilot, Oh, shit. I am screwed, blued, and tattooed.

Then out of nowhere, Brodski's rough, deep voice bellowed, "Crutch, get down!" He dived for the floor just as the air erupted in a frenzy of deafening explosions scant inches over his head.

No, not just over his head; the whole place was exploding, the whole friggin' cargo bay and everything in it was going up in big bursts of plastic and glass, dirt and leaves. Sparks were showering down all over the place and it just went on and on and on and Jesus, the pain in his ears, the ringing. What the fuck was Brodski doing? What did he think he was doing?

Something thumped hard on the floor only a couple of feet from where he was crouched; then it blew up, pelting him with clots of damp soil, plant fragments, and gravel. They were killing his terrariums?! If this was some kind of fucked-up military prank, Crutch thought, suddenly giddy, he would fix it so they all slept with waste hoses for the next ten years. Then the giddy feeling disappeared and he knew that a prank was far too much to hope for.

Some time later he realized that although his ears were still ringing painfully, the explosions themselves seemed to have stopped. Hadn't they?

Slowly he raised his head and found he was curled up under the workbench, hugging one of the legs as if it were the only thing that could save him. It took a great deal of effort to make himself let go and he might not have come out from underneath the workbench at all if one of Brodski's men hadn't reached down and hauled him out bodily.

The smell of scorched metal and plastic mixed with the stench of something very seriously rotten sent him into a short but intense fit of coughing. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded when he could finally speak.

"Just get out of here now," Brodski told him.

The expression on his face made Crutch's stomach drop. Even worse, the two soldiers with him looked the same. This was bad, whatever it was, it was panic-time bad. Crutch had only seen people

look that way one other time in his life and he had never thought he would live long enough to see it again.

Then his gaze fell on the wreckage that had once been his terrariums. "You, you..." floundering, he turned back to Brodski and his men. "You wrecked all my stuff!" Even as he spoke, he knew what an absurd thing it was to say but he couldn't help it.

"Go!" Brodski roared at him and he bolted for the exit.

When most of the smoke and dust cleared, Brodski found himself looking around at his team now gathered in the main cargo bay. All of them were obviously as bewildered as he was.

"Goddamn it," said Kicker. "We nailed him, I know we did. We fucking nailed him. He's got to be here."

Brodski reloaded and powered up his weapon again. "Condor, go high," he said, gesturing at the catwalk. "Briggs, through there." He motioned at the perimeter, signaling Geko and Sven to go with her, then turned to Kicker.

Kicker hefted his weapon and nodded.

Fully aware now, the monster waited in the darkness. The hunt had begun.

THIRTEEN

"This isn't going to work," Rowan said, watching Lowe's profile tensely. The professor didn't answer or show any sign that he had even heard her. He only continued leaning on the medical table staring at nothing, his position unchanged since he had come back from talking to Brodski in the hallway.

She looked around at the others; none of them said anything, either. Kinsa was still weeping but the tears were running down her face in complete silence. There was nothing to hear in the lab except the voices of Brodski and his team in the console speaker as they prowled through the cargo bay.

Rowan took a deep, steadying breath and told herself she was only imagining that she could feel how Jason Voorhees had begun the process of picking them off one by one in the dark.

Jason Voorhees was the name of the killer moving through the darkness but only technically. Which was to say, it was technically a name attributed to that *thing* hulking through the ship...

The miniscule quantity of brain tissue that the sadly deceased Adrienne Hart had detected in the killer's skull was far too small for anything beyond the simplest infant-level awareness... but only technically. This only applied to things that came under the category of life. Anti-life was governed by a different set of rules.

Jason Voorhees was the name for the consciousness inside the killer in the dark, and this consciousness was not confined to a single, specialized area. Consciousness, along with memory, emotions, and intent, ran through his entire body like an electric current, so that there was no central point of vulnerability. There was

no heart to stop, no brain to splatter, and the black fluid that sprayed or splashed or oozed from wounds was nothing remotely like blood.

Now the embodiment of anti-life, Jason Voorhees could feel the presence of each living human: the soldiers moving through the darkness, believing they were hunting him, other humans huddling together in another room, someone else sitting alone in a third location. This was no place that he knew, no place and no time. The original world that had made him was gone, and he was now inside something conveying him to a new world. Everything was different, but only technically. As far as he was concerned, nothing had changed

He flexed his fingers and took a better grip on the big blade.

"Briggs, anything?" Brodski's voice rasped in her headphones.

"Negative," Briggs said as she moved soundlessly through the narrow space between the largest, heaviest pieces of cargo and the wall. Shit, but she'd never realized what a maze the bay was when it was full. You could run a sim down here without bothering to load an environment module, just the monsters.

Except today you wouldn't need those, either.

Dallas's face as she had last seen it, bloody and broken, appeared in her mind and she shut it out, squelching the pang that had come with it. Later for that. Goddamn it.

Right now there was a corner coming up just ahead and she had to concentrate if she wanted to be alive after she turned it. Behind her, she heard the sound of Geko hefting her BFG and under that, Sven's footsteps, and she let herself feel reassured.

"Condor? Anything topside?"

"Negative, sarge," came the answer. "There's no sign of him."

Rowan didn't realize she had been holding her breath until it came out of her in a rush. "This isn't going to work," she said to Lowe again, more urgently this time.

"I've got everything under control!" he snapped at her

Startled, she took a step back. Did he really believe that? She looked around at the rest of the group, still silent, their frightened faces turned to the console speaker as they listened to the soldiers hunt for Jason.

"Where the hell's Sven?" said a woman's voice.

Hunt for Jason? Oh, God, even if they knew better than to believe Lowe or even Brodski could have everything under control, they probably really did think they were hunting Jason and not vice versa.

Suddenly she had a powerful urge to jump on the radio and tell them all they weren't hunting Jason, that nobody ever hunted Jason because nobody could. Jason was the hunter, everyone else was the prey and they had to get out of there before Jason could pick them all off.

There was a crunching noise in the speaker then, like something breaking very slowly. Rowan saw Janessa put a hand to her mouth as Kay-Em crossed the room to be closer to the console. This was followed by the loud clang of metal striking metal and a series of short, effortful grunts, the sound of a man who had met an enemy in the dark and was now fighting for his life.

"Condor? Anything topside?"

"Negative, sarge," Condor said. "There's no sign of him.

He had barely finished answering when the son of a bitch was right there, looming over him like he had just materialized out of nowhere. One moment he had been scanning the area, sweeping his BFG from side to side and the next, the figure was looming over him so close he couldn't even get his weapon up into firing position. Condor had just enough time to register his upraised hand and the knife, blood dripping from the shiny metal descending rapidly towards his face.

He flung himself into a backwards roll and felt the sweep of air as the knife missed him by inches and clanged against the catwalk railing. Before his attacker could recover, Condor bounced up in one smooth motion and planted a vicious *savaté* kick directly under the

bastard's chin, right below that friggin' mask. The guy was about a foot taller than he was but the blow should have put him down, Condor had never met anyone who could stand up to a hit like that, but the son of a bitch didn't even stagger.

The hell with that, Condor thought and let loose on the guy's midsection with a combination of jabs guaranteed to liquefy the internal organs. No armor under those rags, but definitely something weird about the guy's torso. It was like punching a sack stuffed with potatoes and bones, and he should have gone down with a rupture and blood coming out of his mouth, or at least the holes in the mask where his mouth would be.

But he barely took a step back. The son of a bitch was still standing like Condor was no more than a fly bashing itself against him.

Screw this sideways, Condor thought fiercely and drove his elbow into the hollow at the base of his breast bone, at the same moment rotating his arm upwards so his fist caught the guy right in the mask. His head jerked slightly and Condor noticed for the first time that his skull was irregular and lumpy, as if the bone had been broken and re-broken and then allowed to heal any old way. Only that was not what happened when somebody got their head broken over and over.

A knife-edge chop with the blade of his hand didn't even turn the guy's head. Condor rounded on him and elbowed him in the jaw; the bastard didn't even stagger. He was about to try another *savaté* kick when the guy finally raised one arm and, swinging it in an almost casual way, backhanded him right over the railing of the catwalk.

Aw, screw me sideways, Condor thought as he felt himself drop. Thirty feet down to a metal floor with no give to it was going to make scrambled eggs out of his spine, and speaking of scrambled eggs, oh, shit, the back of his head! He wasn't wearing a helmet and sure, the ants could fix him up but oh, shit, this was gonna hurt, this was gonna hurt bad and... and then, impossibly, something caught him in mid-air before he hit the floor.

Everything stopped. He blinked up at the bastard on the catwalk and the impassive mask stared back. Was this what happened when you died, he wondered? In the very last second before the end, everything just went freeze-frame?

Oh, shit, for how long? Just till your body finished dying so you could move on to whatever was coming up next? Or, oh, shit! Was it forever? Was he really going to have to spend eternity staring at this big motherfucker in a mask who had killed him? Who was that masked motherfucker? Dunno, he didn't leave his motherfucking name, he just killed my ass. Oh, shit, this was so fucking unfair.

All at once, the entire scene above him—the guy, the mask, the catwalk, and the shadowy ceiling beyond—began to rotate slowly in a clockwise direction.

Okay, now this was just too friggin' weird, Condor thought. A mild wave of nausea passed through him as his view of the bastard on the catwalk made one complete rotation and went into another without a pause. He started to take a deep breath to counter it and felt his diaphragm hit something hard and immovable, something that shouldn't have been there at all. He barely had a moment to be puzzled before the pain hit him in the exact same spot, a terrible searing as if something had not only run through but torn up his insides in the process.

The tip of one of the Mole's four drill bits came into focus then. As he had sharpened the things many times, he knew right away what he was looking at. Although he didn't know what all that gooey, wet stuff on it was or where it had come from. But then, as everything continued to twirl, he did know. He knew everything he had to know, including the fact that it would be best now to die quickly.

"Just keep your eyes peeled," Brodski told Condor.

No answer, not even a copy that.

Brodski frowned, glancing at Kicker. Kicker hefted the BFG he was holding and looked questioningly at him. Brodski gestured at the shadows off to the right. Kicker nodded once and vanished into them.

"Sven?" Brodski rasped into his comm. "Condor?"

"Can't find them, sarge," Briggs answered.

"Goddamn it." Brodski tapped the link to make sure all the channels were open, even though he already knew they were. "Sven, report! Condor, report! I said, report! That's an order!"

For a few seconds, he heard nothing but the sound of dead air over multiple channels. Then Briggs spoke again.

"Sarge, we found Condor."

They hadn't used the Mole once during the whole trip. It had just sat there in the cargo bay taking up space. Every time Brodski ran out of keep busy assignments, he'd tell Condor to sharpen the drill bits. Always Condor, because he was the only one of them who could grind metal for longer than sixty seconds without going crazy. Nerves of steel or no nerves at all? Nobody knew which and the man himself had declined to say.

Now they'd never know, Briggs thought, staring up at Condor's body skewered on the drill bit. For her part, she couldn't decide whether it had been a good thing that the metal had been so sharp or not. As a general rule, a sharp blade hurt a lot less than a dull one, but she had no idea if that applied to something with a pointed end and an edge that spiraled the length of a central shaft. She couldn't see how it would not have been painful to die twirling around on a coil of metal stuck through your gut, no matter how sharp it was. She hoped that Condor had died too quickly to see his innards trailing along the cutting edge.

Her gaze fell on Geko, standing on the other side of the Mole. Her elegant, sculpted features were set in a stony expression and there was murder in her eye. Briggs took a breath before she spoke into her comm. "Sarge, we found Condor."

"What's his condition?" Brodski asked her. She had to take another breath before she could answer.

"He's screwed." Her gaze met Geko's. The other woman stared back hard and it occurred to Briggs fleetingly that they might have been daring each other to laugh.

Then Geko stood up a little straighter.

"Let's smoke this fucker." Briggs nodded and they moved off, their paths diverging in the darkness.

Kicker took a firmer grip on his BFG as he moved along the side of the large metal cube that contained the extra armaments. They probably should have armed all the students before they'd gone hunting this bastard, he thought. Or maybe they should have put all the students in the shuttle, got in with them and hit the panic button, gambling that when they dropped out of hyperspace, they would find themselves in a zone with a reasonable amount of regular traffic and not the ass-end of East Nowhere. The sound of Geko's voice in his comm made him jump

"I found Sven." Pause. "He's dead."

Kicker wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. Jesus, this was one busy son of a bitch, or was it just one? Could there have actually been more than one running loose on the ship? Sure, he'd seen with his own eyes that they had only brought two on board but that didn't mean they couldn't have picked up a hitchhiker or two without knowing it. The shuttle's perimeter alarms had been down while they boarded and Lou probably hadn't bothered to put them back up before lift-off. According to the gospel according to Lou the Frugal, it was a big waste of energy flipping alarms on and off and on, especially on a dead planet.

Maybe Mr Frugal had decided to make even bigger savings by not putting the perimeter alarms on in the first place. So while they were underground being impressed with themselves for finding two viables in cryo, there could have been two or three more from some other underground facility, already thawed out and ready for action. They could have already been hidden in the shuttle by the time his ass had hit the copilot's seat next to Lou, and nobody would have known. His thoughts were interrupted by an ugly gargling noise. "Who's there?" Kicker whispered into his comm. "Briggs? Geko?"

The noise came again, louder and uglier, and it was coming not just from his comm now but from somewhere in front of him. He had

heard that sound many times before, always in certain combat situations and he knew what it meant

The flashlight strapped to his BFG caught a movement several yards ahead of him. He crouched low, steadying the light and waited with his finger on the trigger.

The figure that finally appeared in the circle of light took several uneven steps towards him on tiptoe, one arm stretched out in a wordless plea for help as air and blood bubbled out of the deep slash in her throat.

"Geko!" Her name came out of Kicker like a moan as he rushed forward just in time to catch her as she pitched forward. He lowered her gently to the floor, trying to ignore the terrible, final sound of blood blowing out of her throat as she struggled to breathe.

"Aw, shit," he said, looking into her eyes and begging her not to die. "Geko..." He felt her hand start to clutch his shoulder; then suddenly it went limp and dropped to the floor, her knuckles rapping hard on the metal. Air rushed out of her in a final, gargling sigh, sending some of her blood into his face in a fine mist.

"Aw, shit," he said again miserably and let go of her. "Sarge, it's Geko. She's—" There was a flash of metal on his right and he looked up to see the hostile standing only a few feet away. Geko's blood was still dripping from the blade in his hand. Kicker was on his feet, firing before he was even aware of putting his finger on the trigger and hollering at the top of his lungs as if that would double the force of each round he put into the son of a bitch.

The hostile staggered back, a multitude of explosions punching holes in him and then punching more holes in the holes already there. Blood and chunks of flesh flew in all directions. Kicker kept firing, unaware either that he was still roaring in unchecked fury or that he was now advancing on the bastard as well; he was unaware of anything except how much he wanted to put the motherfucking son of a bitch bastard down.

Abruptly, the figure keeled over backwards. Kicker stopped firing just in time to hear a sound like someone stabbing a large bag of wet garbage. He moved closer, shining his flashlight on the place where the hostile had fallen.

For half a second, the sight in front of him made no sense at all. Then his head cleared and he saw one of the grappling hook blades protruding from the center of the bastard's chest.

All right! He was slinging his weapon when his gaze fell on a set of controls within easy reach of his left hand. Even better, he thought and slammed his fist down on a large, green button. Immediately, the grappling hook began to ascend, taking the hostile with it, coming to a stop ten feet up.

"Sarge, I got him!" he shouted into the comm. "Repeat: I got the motherfucker. You copy?"

"I copy. On my way." Brodski sounded as if he were talking with clenched teeth. "Don't take your eyes off him. You copy that?"

For answer, Kicker put a few more rounds into the hostile's dangling legs, making sure he got the kneecaps. Now even if the son of a bitch turned into a zombie, he wouldn't be chasing anyone around, Not with shattered kneecaps. "Take your time, sarge." Kicker drawled, turning his back on his trophy. "He ain't goin' nowhere."

In Lab One, Rowan covered her face with both hands. Oh God, he hadn't really just said that, had he? Everyone else in the lab was talking at once, happy and relieved and sure they were safe but Rowan heard none of it. She stood with her ear close to the console speaker, waiting for the inevitable.

She didn't have to wait for long. The scream was even worse than she had expected. But that was the thing about Jason—no matter how bad you thought anything was going to be, it would always be worse. No matter how hard you tried to prepare yourself, you simply couldn't. She pressed her tightly folded hands against her lips as if she were trying to keep a scream of her own in, even though she knew she wasn't going to scream yet. Not yet, but sometime soon. Much sooner than she'd have liked.

"Briggs..." came a hoarse, agonized whisper. "Briggs. Get out of here."

Rowan clenched her hands tighter waiting for Briggs to answer. No, waiting for everyone to realize that Briggs wasn't going to answer, ever.

"Briggs! Where the hell are you?" demanded Brodski.

Rowan closed her eyes. Where do you think?

"Briggs, answer me! Where the—" Brodski's voice cut off sharply. There was some kind of unidentifiable background noise followed by a heavy sigh. "Aw, Briggs. Goddamn it."

Rowan opened her eyes and looked at Lowe in alarm. "He's all alone in there."

Lowe blinked at her, baffled.

"Brodski," she said, her heart pounding too fast and too hard. "Brodski's all alone in there."

Waylander appeared at her side, looking from her to the speaker and back again, as if to ask if she were sure. She nodded almost imperceptibly and he turned to Lowe, who raised a peremptory hand to forestall any questions or comments. The student turned back to her and then looked around at the others but no one else had anything to say and the silence in the lab remained unbroken until Brodski spoke again.

"Okay, you son of a bitch," Brodski muttered, keeping his back against the wall as he moved slowly forward. He was going to keep circling the perimeter with his back to the wall until the hostile came at him. Hours or days, it didn't matter. The motherfucker was not going to sneak up behind him. If he wanted to eat Elijah Brodski's lunch, he was going to have to come at him straight on, face to face. And then Elijah Brodski was going to cut out his heart and show it to him, and then put it back in and cut it out again, over and over, once for each member of his team. See how the ratfuck-bastard liked that kind of treatment. And if Lowe had a problem with that, he'd ask the professor how he'd like a little heart surgery himself.

He reached the door between the main cargo bay and the utility room that served as storage for spare parts and paused, thinking

hard.

Take a look? If there had been anyone left to watch his back, he wouldn't have hesitated. Instead, he used his security code to double-lock it from the outside. Now anyone in there couldn't get out and anyone who wanted to get in was shit out of luck. He took a moment to top up the ammo in his sidearm and then got moving again.

His back was right against the center of the door he had just locked when something exploded out from it right next to his head. A moment later, something hard and thick had wrapped itself around his neck.

An arm, he realized. It was an arm; a fucking arm strangling him. It had punched right through the metal door and it was strangling him from behind. From fucking behind!

Brodski flailed wildly, gasping and choking. The muscles in the arm had no give to them. Whatever they were made of, it wasn't flesh, Brodski thought absently. He pulled at it anyway, fighting for breath.

All at once, he felt a slight shift in the arm's position and an even slighter let-up in the pressure against his windpipe. He sucked in as much air as he could, preparing to take advantage. Then something punched him squarely in the kidney.

He heard himself bellow with surprise and pain. At the same time, the arm around his neck loosened even more and was replaced by a hand large enough to span his throat. Brodski went to pull himself free and discovered that he was stuck to the door.

How the fuck? By his kidney?

Then he looked down and saw that he was actually nailed to the door by a long, nasty blade with vicious saw teeth. Which, he was pretty sure, had passed through his kidney.

"Shit," he growled. "It's gonna take more than a little poke in the ribs to bring this ole' dog down."

Immediately, he felt what seemed like a hard punch to his other kidney. He didn't have to look down to know what it really was, but he was curious. Not another knife, but something like a metal pike, poking a good two feet out of his torso.

"Yup," he said, staring down at the pointy end sadly. "That oughta do it."

What the fuck did anybody need a fucking pike on a starship for, anyway, Brodski wondered as everything went black.

FOURTEEN

"Such a waste." Rowan looked up at Lowe sharply, not quite sure that she had heard him correctly. Or had she just imagined he had said anything at all?

She glanced around at the others for their reactions but their expressions told her nothing she didn't already know. Her gaze came to rest on Tsunaron. She thought that he might be on the verge of speaking; instead he simply leaned forward and shut off the console speaker, which was now broadcasting nothing but static. The silence in the laboratory deepened.

"I told him to stay calm."

This time the sound of Lowe's voice startled her enough to make her jump slightly. She stared at him in bewilderment, wondering if he knew he wasn't making any sense.

"I told him to wait until we reached Solaris," Lowe went on, his tone maddeningly reasonable. "Then we could take care of this monster. I said, don't go in unprepared." He turned to look at Rowan, as if he expected her to back him up on this. She stared back at him, giving serious consideration to slapping his face. Lowe shook his head. "Brodski was just too proud."

Slapping him wouldn't do any good, Rowan thought; what he really needed was a solid punch. She actually started to take a step towards him when suddenly something pounded heavily on the lab door. Everyone screamed.

A moment later, a very human, slightly muffled voice called out. "Hey, who locked the damned door?"

"It's Crutch," Janessa said, addressing no one in particular.

"He's the copilot," Tsunaron added in response to Rowan's puzzled look and went over to let him in.

Rowan thought the man who came in looked more like an overweight Gypsy fortune teller than a copilot. He also looked one hundred percent freaked out; obviously Jason had crossed his path, too.

"Somebody want to tell me what the hell's going on?" he demanded. His gaze barely lingered on her unfamiliar face as he looked around at everyone.

"The ex-grunts are dead," Tsunaron told him.

The copilot stared at him incredulously. "Which ones?"

"All of them."

He looked searchingly at all the other faces in the room again. "Oh, Jesus," he said finally, reaching out blindly for something to lean on. He found a chair and half fell into it. "Oh, man."

Abruptly, Lowe went over to the console and hit a switch. "Lou, how much longer before we reach Solaris?"

"I'm about to bring us out of hyperdrive right about now," replied the pilot. So far, his was the calmest voice Rowan had heard in the last few minutes. She hoped that wasn't simply because he was the only one who didn't know what was going on.

"Well, that's okay, then," the copilot said, his voice only a little shaky. "We'll be all right. Brodski and his guys trapped it in the cargo bay and we're locked in here. We're safe. Right?"

"Will the Solaris grunts be able to kill him?" Kinsa asked in a small, weepy voice.

"Absolutely," Lowe said quickly. "Relax, people. I've been in constant contact with Solaris. They have sixty highly trained professionals standing by to get us off this ship. Everything is going to be all right."

Rowan squeezed her eyes shut. God, but she wished he'd stop saying things like that. Or didn't he think Jason was killing them all off quickly enough?

On the bridge, Lou had finally reached the limit of his good humor. He was also beginning to understand why so many of his fellow pilots maintained their bad tempers no matter what. When was the last time this kind of thing happened to any of them? Right, never—and it never would. But him, good old happy-go-lucky Lou Goddard,

he might as well have had a target tattooed on both his forehead and ass, so people could get him coming and going.

"Damned Lowe and his damned kids and their goddamned field trips," he muttered. "Oh, sure, bring a psycho on board. Nice extra credit project. I can just guess who's gonna get stuck cleaning up the mess. And they'll probably blame me for it, too."

Solaris was large in the viewport in front of him; just beyond it was the arc of Earth II in crescent. Both looked great to Lou.

His comm-unit crackled to life. "Solaris to *Grendel*. We have you on approach. Standby for docking procedure."

"*Grendel* to Solaris, roger that. We need plenty of medical and military to meet us at the gate," Lou said. "We've got a big goddamned problem here, a real goat-fuck."

"What kind of problem, *Grendel*?"

What kind of problem? Lou gave a short, humorless laugh. Glad you asked that question, Solaris. What a goddamned goat-fuck of a day I've had. He opened his mouth to break it down for them when he heard someone come in behind him.

That was all he needed now, some student poking around and getting in the way. This was the perfect time for a demonstration of his new, not-so-happy-go-lucky attitude. He twisted around and looked up.

"Repeat: what kind of problem, *Grendel*?"

What kind of problem, they wanted to know. Even if his mouth hadn't been too dry for him to speak, he could not have answered. There was no way to sum up in a few succinct words what kind of problem he had.

Considering that Kicker had described the chick as cute, this had to be the other viable that Lowe had insisted on bringing aboard. As far as Lou was concerned, it was also incontrovertible proof that Lowe had shit for brains. Anyone with real brains would have taken one look at this thing and left it right where it was, and in one big friggin' hurry, even if they hadn't been lucky enough to recover a cute chick.

Was she cute? Lou hoped so. He hoped like anything that she was as cute as this thing was ugly.

All of that plus his entire personal history to date went through his mind in less than a second. Then he went to pieces.

"Solaris to *Grendel*, pull off and decrease approach speed. Over." Rowan looked over at the speaker on the console. There was a sensation in her chest as if an enormous hand had somehow reached inside and taken hold of her heart. She had one excruciatingly brief moment of hope that what she heard was nowhere near as scary as it seemed to her, that as a stranger in these parts she simply didn't know a routine docking transmission when she heard one, but the moment was over even before the voice spoke again.

"*Grendel*, decrease approach speed now! You're coming in too hot! Pull off! Repeat, pull off!"

She turned to Tsunaron but he and Waylander were lunging towards a monitor at a different console. Alarm bells began ringing loudly and she saw Kinsa drop to the floor and cover her head with both hands. Was that proper emergency procedure in a spacecraft, Rowan wondered? Apparently not, since Janessa was trying to haul her back up on her feet.

"Oh, man!" Waylander yelled over the still-ringing alarms. "Look out! Everybody, brace yourselves!"

Now Janessa was diving for the floor herself, along with everyone else. Rowan tried to do likewise but for some reason her legs wouldn't obey. All at once, her inner ear went crazy and told her that the room and everything in it was now tilted at a forty-five degree angle. Her eyes were trying to roll up in her head as her vertigo intensified. Someone was screaming in terror. No, several people, including herself. She was falling, no, almost falling...

Then she was flying. She only went a few feet before she hit the floor again and rolled over and over as the entire ship rocked and shuddered from some kind of tremendous impact. The noise completely drowned out the alarms although later on, Rowan remembered the din more as something she felt rather than heard. Or was deafened by, maybe.

But she hadn't felt deafened at the time, not then and not immediately after it came to an end. Her ears hadn't been ringing and everything hadn't sounded muffled, as if she were wearing thick earmuffs. It was more as if she had been part of a loud crash or explosion, as opposed to just hearing it, as if she had served as the medium that carried the sound.

In space, she thought dazedly, no one can hear... well, anything. Because space was a vacuum and sound couldn't travel in a vacuum.

She had come to rest face down on the cold, polished floor. Cautiously, she tried lifting her head a few inches only to have her inner ear go crazy on her again. Pressing her cheek firmly against the floor, she tried to get a sense of her body. Or was this the floor, she wondered suddenly? Had the ship rolled over?

Abruptly, she felt her body slide a short distance and then come to a stop against another hard surface. Another intense wave of vertigo swept through her and her stomach threatened to empty itself despite the fact that there was nothing in it.

Then everything snapped back into focus and she found herself sitting in a heap against the lab's forward wall. People were scattered all over the lab, looking around with wide, fearful eyes, except for Lowe who was clinging to the medical bed and whimpering. She started to say something, anything, just to see if she could when all at once there was another impact. The lights flickered and she was tumbling across the floor towards the opposite wall.

This time, she fetched up against the base of one of the immovable console chairs. Some impulse made her hang onto it with all her strength while the ship juddered violently all around her. The lights came on, flickered, and went out again, but not before she had time to see Kay-Em pass directly over her head and slam into the controls for the medical bed. Sparks showered down on her as she dropped onto the bed and then rolled off onto the floor. A second later, Rowan saw her stand up and begin brushing fragments from the damaged equipment from her uniform in a most unruffled, matter-of-fact way.

The lights flickered again, trying to go back on, and then died altogether, leaving the room in total darkness. Gripping the chair,

Rowan closed her eyes and waited for another impact or an explosion or the hiss of air escaping as the ship broke apart.

Instead, she heard Tsunaron ask, "Everyone okay?"

She opened her eyes to see that an emergency lighting system had kicked in, providing adequate if rather dim illumination. Just like every other emergency system she had ever been forced to depend on, Rowan thought as she made herself let go of the chair and stand up along with everyone else. What the hell was it with emergency lighting systems? Why did they all have to be so goddamned dim? Four hundred forty-five years in the future, they could bring you back from the dead but you still had to suffer eyestrain in a power failure?

"Would somebody mind telling me what the hell just happened?" Janessa demanded, her attempt to sound angry completely undercut by the way her voice was shaking, along with her entire body. She was looking at the copilot with what was supposed to be an imperious glare, but the man seemed to be too dazed to know who she was, much less answer.

"Nothing," Lowe said quickly, straightening up in an effort to assert himself as being in charge. "Nothing happened, everything's all right. We just overshot, that's all. We'll turn around and go back."

As if on cue, the ship shuddered one last time and then was still.

"What was that?" Janessa asked in a tiny voice.

"Oh my God," said Waylander. He and Tsunaron stood in front of the monitor they had been watching earlier. "It's Solaris."

"What about it?" Janessa snapped, her voice trembling worse than ever.

"It's gone." Waylander's eyes were wide in his solemn face. "Solaris is gone."

Kinsa suddenly came to life from where she was sitting on the floor, her head snapping up so sharply that her long dark hair flew back from her face. "What do you mean, it's gone? Solaris is a city, it's a whole fucking city. It can't be gone."

Waylander swiveled the monitor around so the screen was facing her. "Look for yourself."

Rowan managed to sit down in the chair before her knees gave out. In some small, distant part of her mind, she was thinking that it must have been beautiful, whatever Solaris had originally looked like. An orbiting city with a clear view of the stars must have been something to see, not to mention the fact that the view from Solaris must have been equally breathtaking.

Those enormous, silent starbursts that were consuming the last bits of what must have been buildings, streets, perhaps even tree-lined boulevards and parks. It was like a gargantuan firework display. The absence of sound added a sort of haunting note, as it were.

But it was a whole city blowing up. She couldn't wrap her mind around the thousands, perhaps even millions, of deaths or the magnitude of destruction. The only thing she could comprehend was that they were all now trapped in one small spacecraft with Jason Voorhees, and everyone who could have protected them was dead.

"No! No, it can't be gone!" Kinsa was insisting tearfully. "Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?" Rowan realized she had been saying the same thing over and over for quite some time.

"Shut the fuck up!" Lowe roared at Kinsa suddenly. "I can't think with you screaming!"

Kinsa's high voice cut off. Janessa gave Lowe a poisonous look as she put her arms around the other woman and tried to comfort her.

The professor ignored her and spoke into the comm-link. "Lou, what sort of damage are we looking at?"

No answer, of course. Rowan wiped a weary hand over her face.

"Lou? Answer me. What's the condition of the *Grendel*? Lou?" The professor tapped the comm-link control on and off rapidly. "Lou, answer me. Are you there?"

"I'm sending out a distress beacon," Tsunaron said.

"Guys," Janessa turned away from the viewport she had just opened the shield on, "we've lost our entire port pontoon."

Rowan could see that this was definitely not the news anyone wanted to hear.

"Internal pressure is holding," said Kay-Em, consulting some instrument in her hand and sounding as calm and steady as ever.

"However, our main thrusters are offline."

Lowe nodded at her and turned to the copilot, Crutch, who was busy at a control panel. "Life support?"

Crutch made a see-saw motion with one hand. "Far as I can tell, we should be okay for a while."

"But he's out there!" wailed Kinsa.

Lowe rounded on her. "Look, we're going to be fine!" he shouted, actually blustering. "We're in a high-volume traffic lane. Another ship's going to come by, I'm sure of it!" He paused, waiting for someone to dare contradicting him. "We're going to be safe here."

Rowan didn't even have time to wince at this statement before the hard pounding on the door began. They all stood motionless in the utter silence that followed. Hardly daring to breathe, Rowan kept her gaze riveted on the door, waiting for the pounding to begin again. Then dents would start to appear in the metal and the door would crumple and buckle until Jason Voorhees was able to take hold of some bent portion and bend it even more, until he finally managed to peel the entire thing away from the frame and let himself in.

But still there was no sound from the other side of the door, not a creak or a footstep. Rowan tiptoed cautiously across the room and stopped a few feet away from the door, straining her ears.

"Maybe he gave up," said Waylander suddenly.

"You think?" Janessa called from where she and Kinsa were huddled by the glass partition, as far away from the door as possible.

Rowan couldn't tell whether she was being sarcastic or not but she shushed them both anyway and listened for a little while longer before turning to look at the others. "I don't think he's out there."

"You don't?" Janessa said, huddling near the glass panel in the far wall with Kinsa. "Why don't you just stick your head out and have a peek?"

Rowan had no idea if this was also sarcasm or just terror showing as humor and never had a chance to find out. The thought had barely formed in her mind when all at once the glass blew outward into the room with such tremendous force that for a split second, Rowan thought they had been hit by a piece of wreckage from the orbiting city.

Then she saw a flash of metal wet with blood and all thought stopped. Reflexively, she screamed and bolted for the door. Crutch had managed to get it only halfway open before it jammed, thanks to the dents Jason had put in it. He grabbed her arm roughly and slung her through the opening as if he were trying to crack a whip and she landed on her side in the hallway. A moment later, Janessa almost landed on top of her, followed by Kinsa. They helped each other up just in time to see Crutch himself coming out. Kay-Em's face appeared briefly in the opening before she pushed Waylander and Tsunaron out.

"Kay-Em, come on! Now!" Tsunaron said, scrambling to his feet. He started to run back towards the door just as Kay-Em slipped out into the hall, moving quickly but not hurrying, her usual composure intact, not even flinching when the doors suddenly snapped shut behind her.

"Come on!" Janessa yelled in her ear and grabbed her hand, pulling her along after herself and Kinsa. Rowan had a glimpse of Kinsa's bare legs covered with scratches from the flying glass. She was still in her underwear, Rowan thought. She had to fight for her life in her underwear.

But then, that was Jason Voorhees all over. Considering how the bastard usually did things, it was actually kind of miraculous that they all weren't in their underwear, or even less.

Without warning, Janessa stopped short at a juncture where three hallways came together, almost getting herself flattened by Rowan and then Waylander, who was following close behind. Rowan looked around, wondering where they were now as she tried to collect herself. She didn't know her way around the ship; for that matter, she didn't know her way around any space ship. She knew absolutely nothing about how big they were or how they were laid out. Janessa had said something about a pontoon, she remembered vaguely, Pontoons in outer space? What in the world for? Goddamn it!

Rowan turned around to see Kay-Em walking gracefully through a door in the corridor just as it closed behind her. The android's face no longer looked entirely calm and collected. Then a shudder ran through the entire ship, followed by an eerie, echoing groan of metal

buckling and she understood why. They hadn't just destroyed Solaris when they'd crashed into it—they had seriously damaged the ship as well.

Oh, Christ. Suddenly her legs felt very, very shaky. Rowan managed to prop herself up against the nearest wall and took a few slow, deep breaths. She was almost completely steady again when Kinsa suddenly spoke up in a small, anxious voice.

"Where's Professor Lowe?"

Rowan lifted her head with the distinct sensation of blood draining out of her face; her gaze met Tsunaron's. Their lips moved in unison, forming the words though neither of them spoke aloud.

The lab.

Braithwaite Lowe stood in the middle of the laboratory and watched the big, masked shape of Jason Voorhees, notorious murderer, come towards him. He hadn't been able to move before when Jason had smashed through the glass partition from Lab Two in spite of the way everyone else ran for their lives. All he had been able to do was stand and watch them, the students, the thawed-out woman, the copilot, Kay-Em, as they wiggled through the malfunctioning door. He could have gone with them; he could have been with them now. He could have been right in the middle of them all, telling them to shut up every time they started screaming. But his feet had refused to move.

No, not his feet, actually, but his legs. His legs had simply turned into a couple of stiff boards no more mobile than chair legs, or one of Crutch's ridiculous terrarium stands. This had never, ever happened to him before. He had never been in the kind of situation where he literally couldn't move. He was the teacher, the leader and he should have been leading the way out of the lab, leading his kids to safety.

On the other hand, Jason Voorhees was his find. As the leader, he could just lay things out for him. Once he knew where he was and what things were like now, he might also understand that Lowe was

his best friend and rather than trying to execute him or freeze him, he was going to make him rich and famous.

Yeah, that would do it, Lowe thought as Jason Voorhees stalked towards him with the autopsy saw blade in his hand. That had to do it. People said you couldn't reason with a homicidal maniac but probably nobody had ever tried offering the one thing everyone, including homicidal maniacs, wanted: limitless wealth. Money was the great equalizer, the universal cure, the size that fit all. That would do it for sure.

Please let that do it for sure, Lowe thought as Jason Voorhees stopped directly in front of him. He forced himself to smile up at the scratched, feature less mask.

"So, hey, look, Jason. Can I call you Jason? Have you considered how valuable you are?" he said.

Lowe's use of his name seemed to be some kind of stimulus. His head tilted slightly to one side and he moved closer to Lowe, who was unable to keep himself from backing away.

"I'm serious here," Lowe went on. "Fame, money. With my help, you can have it all." He felt his back hit the console and knew he was now out of wiggle room, nowhere else to go. But Jason Voorhees just kept coming at him.

"I know people," he babbled desperately, imploringly. Up close, he could see splatters of blood mixed with clots of black something on the layers of rags that served as clothing as well as countless bullet holes. Brodski's team had shot him up so much, he should have clinked when he walked. Not that he should have been walking at all.

"I know all the right people, I have connections and I know how to use them," Lowe promised, trying to sidle out from between Jason and the console. "All you have to do is name it and I can get it for you. No matter what it is, I can have it for you like that." He pretended that his fingers weren't too sweaty to snap; it was the thought that really counted, the noise was optional. "Together, we can make a fortune. More than a fortune. We can..."

Jason Voorhees leaned forward and Lowe dodged to the right, flinching a little in anticipation of one of those big hands grabbing him around the neck. But Jason didn't even look at him; he was

reaching for something on a tray near the Nanotech 2000. That's funny, you don't look like a techie, Lowe's brain jabbered. Then he saw what Jason had picked up.

"Oh, wow. You want your machete back?" Lowe's heart seemed to be flopping like a beached fish in his chest as relief and terror fought to claim him. "Shit, just go ahead and take it, it's yours! But hey, just remember who saved it for you, okay?"

Jason transferred the autopsy knife to his other hand as he made a close and careful study of the machete, turning it one way and then the other, like a man examining a treasured possession for any possible damage, no matter how slight. Which only made sense, Lowe thought. You couldn't have a notorious murderer without the notorious murder weapon. It would have been like having Jack the Ripper without his knife or Lizzie Borden without her axe—historically inaccurate, inexcusably disrespectful.

But thanks to his having had the presence of mind to retrieve the machete, his conscience wouldn't have to suffer the burden of guilt for having insulted a historical figure, Lowe thought. Ergo, relief could now triumph over terror, and any second now, it would.

Lowe took another small step away from Jason. Immediately the mask turned towards him. At the same moment, he seemed to remember the autopsy blade in his other hand and paused, holding it up next to the old machete in obvious comparison. Lowe could see his one good eye glinting as it swiveled from one to the other and back again.

Should he offer a suggestion, Lowe wondered, or would that be inappropriate? He did have quite a lot of expert knowledge but Jason was the actual practicing killer. As such, he might feel there was really only one expert in the room and anything Lowe had to say would be unwelcome.

Better to keep his ideas on that subject to himself, Lowe decided and put another inch between himself and Jason. His gaze went briefly and longingly to the door. Had things reached the point where he could leave the room just for a minute, just for a bathroom break? Or would Jason take it amiss? Perhaps if you didn't act like a scared victim, then he wouldn't treat you like one.

That had to work: it made perfect sense. Please, let it work, Lowe prayed, with no idea who or what he was praying to. Careful not to look away from Jason, he groped around behind himself for the comm-link on the console.

"Hey, guys, come on back, it's okay!" he said, hoping he had actually opened the channel for ship-wide address. "He just wanted his machete back!"

Jason was looking at him again. Lowe tried a smile on him, doing his best not to think about how the two blades he was holding made a kind of lethal frame.

"You're not going to regret this," Lowe jabbered at him. "You're really not. You'll see that I can do everything I promised and more..."

Abruptly, Jason tossed the old machete over his shoulder and transferred the autopsy blade back to his right hand.

Once more unable to move, Lowe watched as Jason raised the gleaming instrument high over his head. Not ambidextrous then, said a small, distant voice in his mind...

FIFTEEN

Rowan felt the long, agonized wail that echoed through the ship run right through her body. Her gaze met Tsunaron's again; the only color in his desolate face came from the green-tinged emergency lighting and she thought for sure that he was going to pitch forward in a dead faint.

Kay-Em moved closer to him as if sensing the same thing. She probably had, Rowan thought. There was probably a lot more to her than a fancy artificial intelligence. Tsunaron had probably built in all sorts of sensors and detectors and Christ knew what else, so she could take care of humans under any circumstances. This was what they had in the twenty-fourth century instead of the Swiss Army knife: bottle-opener, corkscrew, nail-file, brain surgeon, rocket scientist, bodyguard, even a fourth for bridge if necessary. If, say, a homicidal maniac with a machete broke up the game.

"What do we do now?" asked Janessa quietly. She looked as green as Tsunaron. They all did. "Anyone have any ideas?"

"Well..." Kinsa got up from the railing she had been half-sitting on and gave them all a pained, apologetic smile that was closer to a grimace. "I think I'll just go to my room now. Stoney's going to meet me there."

Janessa put both arms around the girl and pushed her head down on her shoulder, pressing her own cheek against Kinsa's to keep her there. It was an awkward position since Kinsa was actually a couple of inches taller than she was, but Kinsa didn't protest or try to pull away. The sight made Rowan feel as if her heart was about to break; she had to look away or risk bursting into tears.

"How do we get off this ship?" She looked from Waylander to Tsunaron to Crutch and back again, hoping she sounded brusque and business-like rather than weepy and terrorized.

"I don't know," Waylander said, glancing at Tsunaron who was frowning down at the floor thoughtfully.

"Well, can't you beam us off or something?" Rowan asked, seizing on the first idea that came into her head.

"Beam us off?" Waylander stared at her, utterly mystified.

Tsunaron looked up sharply. "The shuttle."

Waylander's face went from puzzled to stunned, but only for a moment. "Hell, yeah, the shuttle!" he said, breaking into an enormous grin. "Crutch? How about it?"

The Gypsy fortune-teller nodded, looking equally hopeful. "Sure. I can do pre-launch from the bridge. We'll have to rework the navigational module because it's only set up for short hauls, but that's nothing, that's easy."

"And we'll go to the shuttle, set it up for refueling, and start the check-off," Janessa added, including Rowan with a look. "Crutch, call when you're ready to reroute the fuel."

"Will do," he said. "Waylander, you're with me. The rest of you, be careful. Watch your backs."

They split into two groups, Crutch and Waylander hurrying up a different hallway to the bridge while the rest of them continued straight along the one they were in. Which put Jason Voorhees behind them, Rowan told herself. Even if she didn't know her way around the ship, she could orient herself that much. As long as they kept going in a straight line, she would know that they were moving away from Jason, not towards him.

They passed through another, larger juncture that opened onto a platform at the top of a short flight of stairs. Kinsa had barely started down them when she suddenly screamed and turned away with both hands over her face. Janessa reached her first and put both arms around her, but whatever soothing thing she had been about to say turned into a horrified gasp. A moment later Rowan understood why.

The veritable lake of blood would have been bad enough; the fact that the corpse lying in the middle of it was missing everything from the waist down made it unbearable. Even worse was the smear outside of the pool. It was exactly as wide as the dead man's waist and very long; horribly, dreadfully long, trailing away to vanish into a shadowy area too many horrible yards away.

Rowan held onto the railing waiting for her body to decide whether it was going to faint or not. The buzzing in her ears waxed and waned with equal intensity. It was as much the smell as the sight that went

with it, that awful charnel house stink of blood recently spilled and now souring outside the body. So much of it in one place, it was kind of amazing that she hadn't smelled it well before she had reached the stairs. Now it was all she could smell and if she had to stand there with it in her nose for very much longer, it might be the only thing she would ever smell from now on.

Then Tsunaron brushed past her on his way down the stairs and somehow the contact woke her up and brought her mind back into sharp focus. Quickly, she trotted down the steps after him.

Kneeling on the bottom step, he reached over and managed to extricate the enormous assault weapon the dead man had been clutching to his chest. Rowan wondered if he was just being a good soldier and keeping it out of the blood.

Christ, what kind of a thing was that to think? She distracted herself by bending down and taking the gun from Tsunaron.

"Hey, be careful!" he said. "You know how to use one of those things?"

The weapon seemed to fall into the firing position in her arms automatically. It was surprisingly light for its size, much lighter than the gun she had used to drive Jason into the cryostasis unit, and just as easy to figure out.

"Sure," she said, raising it to her shoulder to look down the sight. It was actually a screen that not only aimed for her but advised as to the most effective distance, depending on the target. This was one very nice, very lethal killing tool.

Her gaze fell on the dead man again. But it still couldn't kill Jason Voorhees.

She shoved the thought firmly away. "Sure, I can use it," she said. "It's like riding a bike. Once you do it, you never forget how."

"Yeah, but that's a lot more complicated," Tsunaron said, standing up. "That's a BFG. It's a special weapon used only by the military."

Frowning, Rowan looked from the gun to Tsunaron. "So what's BFG supposed to stand for? Big Fucking Gun?"

"Well, actually, yes," put in Crutch, sounding mildly surprised.

"You're kidding aren't you?" Janessa asked incredulously.

"No," Crutch said, looking at all of them. "BFG really stands for Big Fucking Gun. I thought everybody knew that."

"Great, that's settled," Tsunaron said quickly. "Waylander, you're with Crutch. Kay-Em and I will go to the supply hold and pick up everything we can. We'll all meet up at the shuttle bay."

"Fine," Janessa called after him as he and Kay-Em vaulted over the side of the stairs to avoid the pool of blood. She turned to Rowan and gestured towards the shadowy area of the cargo bay. "Now, what's a bike?"

The moment the door to the bridge opened, Crutch put a hand over his nose and mouth and turned away. "Oh, shit."

"Roger that," agreed Waylander, taking a step back and breathing through his mouth. It didn't seem to help.

Crutch reached inside and felt around the wall just to the left of the doorway. "Ah. Found it. Hang on a second." Waylander heard an airy sound like a cross between a whisper and a hum; fresh air puffed into his face and turned the sweat on his scalp cool, raising goose bumps.

"Custom ventilation system," Crutch explained. "Absolute necessity when your pilot won't eat anything that doesn't stink."

Waylander raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Hell, yeah. In Lou's case, BFG stood for Big Fucking Garlic." Crutch blew out a short breath that wasn't a laugh. "Okay, I think that oughta do it," he said, stepping inside. Waylander followed, careful to keep his breathing shallow until he was sure he wouldn't choke. Crutch started towards the copilot's console and then stopped suddenly, staring. Waylander followed his gaze to what seemed to be a lot of red rags thrown carelessly around the pilot's chair and control panel. Then his eyes refocused.

"Oh, God," he murmured, feeling his stomach turn over. "That's... God, that's twisted."

"Poor bastard," said Crutch, sounding as sick as Waylander felt. "Son of a bitch tore him limb from limb. And then tore up the pieces

some more."

Yeah, I can see that. Waylander bit back the retort and looked away.

"Of course, I've seen worse," Crutch added, adjusting the bandana tied around his head.

"I haven't," Waylander said. "Thank Christ."

Crutch sighed and went over to the control panel for the shuttle. "Let's get to work."

Tsunaron slammed another set of armaments into a third travel pack and then grabbed another sidearm from Brodski's weapons locker. Rowan might have felt confident with a BFG, but he had never been able to get used to anything larger than one of these two-handers. Well, he needed two hands, unlike Brodski. All he could do was hope for better luck than Brodski had had.

"There's enough firepower here to level a moon, he said, looking over what he and Kay-Em had gathered already. "Grab what you can and let's head back to the shuttle."

Kay-Em added two more packs of ammo to the collection along with a BFG and went to raid more of the lockers. Tsunaron watched her for a long moment. She worked with her usual composure but something about the expression on her face was giving him the feeling that he had missed several cascade incidents again. Several more on top of the ones he had already missed. He remembered how he had planned to run a thorough diagnostic at the earliest opportunity; so much for that idea.

"So what do you think, Kay-Em?" he blurted as she turned around with her arms full of hardware. She looked at him questioningly. "You think we're going to make it?"

"Our statistical probability of survival is thirteen percent," she told him.

"Thirteen percent?" Tsunaron pounded his fist on the counter where they had piled the supplies they were taking with them.

"Bullshit! That's bullshit, Kay-Em! Can't you do any better than that?"

Kay-Em drew herself up slightly, her expression almost hurt now. "I did not choose those odds. Preparing the shuttle for launch may be a relatively simple process but getting there alive," she shook her head, "is a problem."

"God." Tsunaron massaged his forehead with one hand. "Is there any way we can improve those odds?"

The anxious expression on Kay-Em's face was suddenly replaced by something completely new, a look that Tsunaron had never seen before and wasn't sure how to read. There was something of recklessness and hope, and a light in her eyes that he would have called feverish if she'd been human.

And then all of a sudden, he realized that her expression was actually a mirror of his own and he understood perfectly. He reached for her but she was already in his arms.

While Tsunaron was not the most experienced man on Earth II or even on the *Grendel*, he had been fortunate enough to be on the receiving end of some classic kisses, including a couple that had been about as close to perfect as anything ever could be. But kissing Kay-Em took him to a whole new level.

In terms of the strictly tactile, she felt no different than any human woman, but the similarity began and ended there. Kay-Em kissed him with undivided attention and unbroken concentration, and she put everything that she was behind it. As a result, everything he was responded to her. Arousal ran through his entire body like internal lightning.

Finally they broke apart, but only because he needed to come out for air.

Kay-Em gazed into his eyes looking even more feverish. "Statistical probability for survival just went up to fifty-three percent."

"Wow," he said. "One kiss jumped us forty percent?"

She nodded.

The huge smile spreading across his face felt like his own personal sunrise. "Want to go for a hundred?"

She did.

According to Janessa, cutting through the cargo bay was the most direct and therefore quickest route to the shuttle bay. Plus, she insisted, it was good strategy. Knowing that he had killed everyone in the cargo bay, Jason would be looking elsewhere for new victims. Rowan had to admit it was pretty good thinking, especially by a college student who dressed like a sci-fi geek's wet dream and didn't know what a bike was.

No, that was wrong, Rowan scolded herself silently as she moved through the shadows with the BFG up and ready; she was being catty and unfair to Janessa. It was good thinking for anybody, but particularly for someone who was also looking after a hysterical classmate and doing a damned good job of it. Janessa didn't deserve her scorn any more than she deserved to suffer a violent, bloody death at the hands of Jason Voorhees. She was just a kid.

They were all just kids, all of them who were left, except the gypsy-looking copilot Crutch, Rowan thought. Although if she went strictly by age (her literal chronological age put her close to five hundred) then even Crutch was a kid in comparison. They were all kids and she was the *eminence grise*, the gray-haired elder who also happened to be the only one with firsthand experience in dealing with Jason.

We're doomed, said a tiny voice in her mind. She squelched it immediately as hard as she could. Impatient with herself, she paused and looked back at Janessa who was following closely behind with her arm around Kinsa's trembling shoulders.

"Keep going straight," Janessa whispered.

"T-junction coming up," Rowan whispered back.

Janessa made a baffled face. "A what?"

"There's a path leading off to the left up ahead," Rowan said patiently. "Do we turn or keep going straight?"

"Go straight," Janessa told her. "We're over halfway there."

Rowan nodded. She paused to wipe her sweaty hands on her pants, first one and then the other, earning a soft but audible tsk-ing noise from Janessa. Her clothes, Rowan remembered and smiled

inwardly. If she had been Janessa, she probably wouldn't have been too happy to see someone treating her pants that way, either. I promise I'll either pay to have them cleaned or I'll replace them, she promised the other woman silently as she took a firmer grip on the BFG and kept moving.

Just before she reached the T-junction, she stopped again and held up a hand to tell the two women behind her to do the same. All the soldiers had been killed in here, Rowan thought bleakly. Why she thought that the three of them, with no combat training whatsoever, had any chance of getting through alive was probably a sign of incipient madness.

Bracing herself, she stepped forward and aimed the BFG down the intersecting pathway.

Two long bloody poles were protruding through a closed door. The blood was still fresh enough that it was dripping off the pointed ends. Rowan jumped, letting out a little gasp at the sight. Immediately, the other two women were at her side before she could warn them off; Kinsa let out a shaky cry and put her hand over her mouth, refusing to let Janessa turn her away.

From somewhere farther down the pathway came a noise like something being dragged on the floor. All three women jumped and Kinsa let out another cry.

"Omigod, it's him, isn't it?" she said, tears running down her face. "He came back, he's in here with us, he's gonna..."

Rowan slung the BFG by the shoulder strap and clapped her hand over Kinsa's mouth. "Shut up."

Kinsa whimpered an unintelligible protest.

"I mean it," she whispered fiercely, so close to Kinsa's ear that her lips brushed against it. "You make another sound and I swear I'll snap your neck myself."

Kinsa froze, not even breathing now as she stared at Rowan with wide, frightened eyes.

"You sure are good with people," Janessa said archly.

"I'm trying to listen," Rowan said, deliberately unapologetic. She let go of the terrified Kinsa and raised the BFG again, shining the

flashlight down past the bloody spikes. The noise came again and Rowan thought she saw a movement just outside of the circle of light.

All at once, the entire overhead lighting system for the cargo bay flickered on for a fraction of a second before going dark again, just long enough to give Rowan the impression of someone face down on the floor and stirring ever so slightly.

"My God," she breathed, trying to shine her flashlight beam on the same area. "I think there's someone alive over there."

"I didn't see anything," Janessa said.

Rowan looked at her and saw that she wasn't just being contrary.

"Rowan, we don't have much time," she added. "I know," Rowan told her. She thought for a moment. "Which way is the shuttle from here?"

"Straight ahead, just like I told you." Janessa pointed

"Okay. You two go on ahead. I'll catch up."

Janessa caught her arm as she started to move cautiously down the pathway towards the bloody poles.

"I'll be all right," Rowan said, doing her best not to sound impatient. "The two of you go."

Kinsa was already on her way but Janessa hesitated. "All right," she said dubiously, "but just..." she made a pained face at Rowan. "Don't ruin my pants, okay?"

"It's a deal," Rowan said and gave her a little push. "Now go."

Janessa hesitated for half a second and then took off after Kinsa. "Come on, girl," Rowan heard her say. "We're goin' home."

Rowan winced as she moved along the narrow pathway. God, I hope so.

She had intended simply to duck under the bloody poles and keep moving; instead, she found she couldn't help coming to a complete stop. Blood was still dripping from the metal, big irregular clots of it and, now that she was getting a closer look, pieces of tissue. If she ducked under the poles, it would drip down on her.

Oh, you poor, poor baby, said a voice in her mind acidly. You might get some blood on you. What's wrong? Isn't the blood of a soldier who got slaughtered while trying to protect you good enough for you?

Rowan swallowed hard. No, it's that I'm not good enough for it.

Then she shook herself. "Get a fucking grip," she muttered. "Lose the fucking melodrama already."

Still, her body refused to crouch down. Instead, she flattened herself against the opposite wall and sidled past the pointed ends, half expecting them to suddenly drive forward and run her through. Then she was past them, feeling foolish and guilty and full of sorrow for who ever had had to die for Lowe's valuable scientific artifact.

She reached the end of the passageway and found herself facing a more open area of smaller crates and containers. Quickly, she swept the light back and forth, her finger poised over the trigger. Maybe she should fire anyway, spray everything in front of her just as a precaution.

Then she heard a shuddery sigh off to her right. How she managed to stop herself before putting a million more holes in Brodski to go with the two ragged wounds he already had was beyond her ability to understand.

"Brodski!" She rushed over to where he was slumped with his back against a large metal crate. Now she knew whose blood was dripping from those poles, she thought, looking at the holes in his midsection. God, how was he still alive?

He turned to look at her, his dark face covered with sweat, and smiled with half his mouth. "Hi," he whispered.

"Hi back atcha," she said, slinging the BFG over her shoulder. "I'm getting you out of here. They're refueling the shuttle. We're leaving." She took hold of his shoulders with either hand, then thought better of it and slipped her hands under his arms instead. "Okay. On three," she added as his head dropped back against the crate and he closed his eyes. He was still breathing, though; she could feel it. "Brodski, are you with me? Stay with me. On three," she repeated. He shook his head. "One... two... thr"

Her last word was lost in a grunt of effort, which had absolutely no effect on Brodski other than to make him grimace in pain. She might as well have been trying to lift a building.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, letting go of him. She wiped his face with the back of her hand just to be able to do

something for him. "I'm sorry, I can't lift you, you're too heavy for me. I'll have to get help."

He caught one of her hands in his. "Just save yourselves. Get the hell out of here."

"I'm not leaving you," Rowan said hotly. "I'm not. I won't. I'll be right back with help, I promise."

Brodski let his hand fall away as his eyes closed again. But he was still breathing, Rowan saw. He was still breathing and she was going to make damned sure that didn't change. She got up and ran back down the pathway, barely hesitating at the poles this time as she dashed for the shuttle.

SIXTEEN

"Does that ventilation have a higher setting, by any chance?" Waylander covered his nose and mouth with one hand as he watched Crutch using what looked like a T-shirt to wipe up the worst of Lou's blood splashed liberally over his console.

"Sorry, kid, it's already as high as it'll go," Crutch said. "Try breathing through your mouth."

"That doesn't work," Waylander said. "Only makes me start gagging."

Crutch paused and sniffed the air a couple of times. "It's all in your head. Air's practically spring fresh now."

"Yeah? What's spring like on your planet?"

Crutch gave a short laugh. "Hey, I'll prove it to you. It's just because you're looking at this." He indicated the wadded-up T-shirt. "As soon as this is out of sight, your personal air quality will improve a thousand percent." He dropped the bloody cloth on the floor and kicked it under the console. "Count to five, then tell me I'm not right."

"Your words, not mine," Waylander said.

The copilot glanced down briefly. "Hey, toss me your vest, will ya?"

Puzzled, Waylander complied, still keeping his distance. A second later, his bewilderment turned to disgust as Crutch used the garment to wipe his hands.

"You bastard," he said.

Crutch was unperturbed. "Hey, you're lucky you weren't alive during the Microsoft conflict," he said, kicking Waylander's vest under the console when he was through. "We were beating each other over the head with our own severed limbs."

"Yeah, fortune sure smiled on me there," Waylander said, a bit grumpy not only because of his ruined vest but also because Crutch had been right—the air did smell better to him.

There was an electronic hum from the console then as a comm-channel opened. "Crutch?" asked Janessa's voice, sounding slightly filtered. "You and Waylander get to the bridge okay?"

"Got it one," Crutch told her. "We're working here, lady. What's it like where you are?"

"Kinsa's doing the prep in the shuttle," Janessa said. "Right, Kinsa?"

"Absolutely," Kinsa replied. "I'm on the case." Waylander thought he detected some uncertainty in that statement, even as she and Janessa ran through the checklist together.

"Controls are free and correct," Kinsa announced finally. "Crutch, you ready?"

"Ready," Crutch confirmed. "Stand by for fuel transfer, cells six and seven bypass."

"Negative, Crutch," Janessa broke in, sounding tense. "I am not showing isolinear integrity."

Waylander's heart gave a fearful jump as his gaze met Crutch's, who didn't seem so much concerned about a possible problem as he was impressed by Janessa's hitherto unsuspected competence.

"Okay, try this," Crutch said. "Reroute through Lem-Pac Fusion Bypass."

There was a pause. Then Janessa said, "Say again? Confirm you said Lem-Pac Fusion Bypass."

"Confirming Lem-Pac Fusion Bypass," Crutch said. "You'll never find that in any manual but trust me, it works."

"Okay, but damn it, Crutch, you better know what you're doing," Janessa said dubiously. "Lem-Pac Fusion Bypassed. Standing by." There was another slightly longer pause followed by a sigh of relief. "You did it, Crutch! You did it! Master conduit is free of obstructions. We are refueling."

Crutch mimed tipping a hat and gestured for Waylander to check the 3D shuttle schematic now rotating on a wall-screen to his right. He had barely started to confirm the specs when he heard a new voice on the comm.

"Guys, listen, I found Brodski," Rowan said, tense but at the same time almost breathless with excitement. "He's alive!"

Waylander turned to look at Crutch, who was equally amazed.

"Where is he?" Janessa asked.

"He's in the cargo bay, but I can't move him by myself. Are Crutch and Waylander back yet?"

Crutch nodded at Waylander. "Go ahead, kid. I can handle it from here. We're practically cruising."

"On my way," Waylander called and left the bridge at a run. Goddamn, Brodski was still alive. Now that was a genuine instance of fortune smiling on them all. With Brodski still kicking, there was actually a chance that they would get out of this alive.

"Crutch? How are we doing on time?" Janessa asked, glancing nervously at Kinsa visible in the open door of the shuttle. She seemed to be calm enough now as she sat in the pilot's seat. She certainly knew what she was doing; Janessa hadn't had to prompt her once. Some people were like that; useless in an emergency until you give them something to do. Then suddenly they were handling things even better than you were. Well, for as long as they stayed focused, anyway, which was something you couldn't take for granted. You had to keep an eye on them because you never knew what was going to blow them out again. And with Kinsa, that might be nothing at all.

All at once, she realized that Crutch had answered her but she hadn't been paying attention. "Say again, Crutch?" she asked.

"I said, time we ain't got," Crutch replied. "But with my incredible skills and a little good luck..." he paused and she could hear him doing something

"Or a lot of good luck?" she said with a small, nervous laugh.

"And with a whole shitload of good luck," another pause as something clicked and beeped in the background, "we will be out of here. That's it. Shuttle is fuelled and ready. All we have to do is disconnect the fuel lines."

Crutch let himself fall heavily against the back of his chair and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. Jesus, that part had almost been painless. For a change. When he opened his eyes again,

his gaze fell on the pilot's chair and the gory pieces that were all that remained of Lou. Oh, yeah, almost painless; sure, almost painless. Christ, the view from the copilot's seat was even worse than what had greeted him when he'd first walked in. The murdering son of a bitch had even ripped Lou's cowboy hat into half a dozen pieces.

"Lou, you poor fucking bastard, you," Crutch murmured, surprised to find himself suddenly on the verge of tears. "What a way to go. Man, I hope you died fast." He took a steadying breath and felt the urge to weep decrease dramatically. Just shock, he told himself; it was all just shock. This was a kick in the head even for a veteran of the Microsoft conflict. That had been every bit as rough, as he always told everyone. He hadn't been exaggerating to Waylander about close combat with severed limbs. But when it was all over, everybody had come out of it with a raise in pay and increased benefits and profit-sharing. Plus they'd gotten all their parts back at no extra charge.

Unlike poor old Lou. Even if they could find all his parts, the only thing anyone could do with them was extract DNA. Damn, he was really going to miss the guy, Crutch thought.

Something bumped against the back of his chair and then nudged his left arm. Thinking it was Waylander, he turned to ask him why the hell he wasn't helping What's-Her-Name with Brodski and then froze. The pale, terrified features of Professor Lowe materialized practically in the crook of his elbow.

Crutch's heart gave a hopeful leap. Goddamn, Lowe was alive, too, he thought. Somehow the professor had managed to survive just like Brodski... but then he noticed both the wet red gash where Lowe's neck ended and the bloody gloved hand clutching Lowe's hair.

Automatically, he slammed his fist down on the console to open the ship-wide channel. "Oh, shit , I've got company up here, people!"

It was the last coherent thing he said.

"I've got company up here, people!" Crouching next to the now-empty spot in the cargo bay where she had last seen Brodski, Rowan cut off in the middle of telling Waylander that yes, she was one

hundred percent certain this was where she had found him. Crutch's announcement was immediately followed by a long scream and the sickening sound of flesh and bone hitting metal

"Oh my God," she whispered, or thought she whispered. She couldn't actually hear herself over the man bellowing in pain as Jason killed him. But Waylander was already hauling her to her feet and pushing her back towards the shuttle bay.

Janessa screamed Crutch's name into the comm several times even as the rational, orderly part of her mind, operating on the assumption that it was in charge, was telling her it was pointless. She knew that and went on screaming anyway, unable to stop. At some point, she changed from screaming Crutch's name to ordering Rowan and Waylander to hurry up and get their asses back to the shuttle bay.

But that didn't help either. Crutch was still bellowing and wailing and those smashing noises went on and on, occasionally mixing with the sound of electronic equipment blowing out or shorting out so badly that the lights in the shuttle bay were starting to flicker a little.

And then somehow when she was looking for Rowan and Waylander to show up dragging Brodski between them, she got turned around so that she was looking at the shuttle instead. Panic charged through her entire body with a force that almost knocked her off her feet.

Something had gone wrong with the shuttle; the moment she had looked at it, she had known. Something had gone so terribly, horribly, incredibly wrong that she couldn't see Kinsa inside it any more. It took her a moment to realize that she couldn't see Kinsa because the door was closed.

"Noooooooo!" she screamed and hurled herself at the door, pounding on it with both fists, then moving to the comm-link on the wall to the right. "Kinsa, open the door! Please, open the door, open the fucking door!"

The worst part was not that she could hear Kinsa weeping inside the shuttle but that Crutch was still wailing, still bellowing, still dying, and she could hear that not only on the shuttle bay console but on the speaker inside the shuttle as well, and no matter how loud

she screamed for Kinsa to open the door and let her in, she couldn't drown it out.

"What's going on?" Strong hands grabbed her from behind and turned her around. "Why aren't you on board?"

She blinked up at Waylander through her tears. "Because Kinsa won't open the door, that's why!" she sobbed. "Offhand, I'd say she's having what they used to call a total freak-out." She turned her head towards the comm. "And this is really a very bad time for it!"

Rowan slipped in front of her and, making a shushing motion at her, put her mouth close to the speaker. "Kinsa, honey, can you hear me?" she asked gently. "I need you to open the door. Can you do that, Kinsa? Can you open the door? It's really, really important."

Janessa was vaguely aware that she was clutching Waylander's arms tightly enough to leave bruises.

Crutch had stopped screaming, she realized. All she could hear was Kinsa weeping, weeping, weeping, and her own heart pounding in her ears.

Finally, the comm speaker crackled. "No," Kinsa said in a teary but firm little voice.

"Kinsa, please," Rowan begged, one hand half-cupped over the edge of the doorway as if it were Kinsa's cheek. "Please, sweetheart, it's all over. We can go home now. All you have to do is open the door for us. Okay, Kinsa? Please?"

"No," Kinsa said again, louder but still teary.

Janessa tore herself away from Waylander and began pounding her fists on the door again.

"Kinsa, you listen to me!" Rowan shouted. "You open that Goddamned door for us right now!"

A heavy thump coming from the cargo bay made all three of them jump. The BFG Rowan had been carrying was in Waylander's hands; he pointed it towards the entrance to the shuttle bay.

"We've gotta do something now!" he shouted.

"Kinsa..." Rowan started, but the rest of what she had to say was drowned out by the loud rumble of engines igniting.

"No!" Janessa yelled as the shuttle bay vibrated around them. "No, Kinsa, don't, the fuel lines are still attached!"

Kinsa heard every word they said on the shuttle's comm-link; she heard every word they said and every moment of Crutch's death and now she had heard enough. She had hit her limit and didn't want to hear any more. She didn't want to talk any more, either. Or think, or spend even one more second in the place where Stoney had been.

No, she wasn't going to think. No thinking, just leaving. Anything was better than this.

The floor tilted sideways, throwing Rowan against one of the covered control modules. She could feel something tugging powerfully on that part of the ship directly underneath, tugging hard but unable to break away. She glanced over her shoulder at the comm, wondering if it would do any good to try talking to Kinsa again now that the word LAUNCH was blinking on and off in big red letters on both the console and the control panel just under the speaker.

Then the floor rocked as something butted against the ship from below, something smaller than the ship itself but big enough to make them feel it. There was another impact and a violent jolt that Rowan knew was an explosion.

This must be where the whole ship blows she thought in a momentary burst of calm rationality. I, can panic now, it won't make any difference.

There was a series of explosions then and she felt the floor rising and falling under her again like a raft on a choppy ocean while something shook her so hard that her teeth were almost chattering. It wasn't actually very long before the noise and the motion died away but Rowan had to force herself to open her eyes and look around.

Still here, she marveled as she pushed herself slowly to her feet. She was still here along with Waylander, who looked dazed, and Janessa, who was crying angry bitter tears. They were still here, still alive, and the ship was still intact around them. Abruptly, she noticed that the word LAUNCH on the control panel had been replaced by unblinking letters that read SHUTTLE NOT FOUND.

Kinsa, she tried to say but her voice refused to work.

And that was one of Jason's lesser known murder techniques—you panicked and killed yourself to save him the effort. Some people might have felt that was a cleaner, better death. Maybe it was but personally, the whole idea made Rowan mad as hell.

"Aw, Jesus wept," Waylander groaned, looking from her to Janessa. "Now what?"

Janessa was staring past him; all color had left her face. "Now we die."

Rowan followed her gaze, knowing with miser able certainty what she was going to see.

"Bullshit!" hollered Waylander. He motioned for Rowan and Janessa to get behind him, raised the BFG, and fired.

There was a hollow click that reminded Rowan of a camera shutter.

"Okay, new plan," Janessa said shakily. "You two hold him and I'll run."

Goddamn it, it just wasn't fair, Rowan thought as Jason backed them towards the useless shuttle door. She had contained and survived him, and now she had to be murdered by him anyway. Goddamn it. Terror, regret, and rage swirled around inside of her. Pressure began to build and she felt an over whelming urge to scream and scream and scream until she had nothing to scream with any more.

She felt the wall against her back. Jason continued to advance on them. Apparently, Lowe had been wrong; Jason had not wanted his machete back after all, preferring to use the shiny new blade he had picked up somewhere on the *Grendel*. Probably from one of the laboratories.

Decided to stick with the hockey mask, though, Rowan thought giddily. New weapon but the old familiar face. Oh, Jesus, this was it!

"Hey, Slappy!"

They all jumped and Jason whirled, raising his weapon.

Tsunaron was standing at the entrance to the shuttle bay with a big grin on his face. Rowan stared at him, her mind utterly blank.

"I got a little something for you!" Tsunaron added and turned towards the corridor on his right.

The woman who appeared there made no sense at all to Rowan; she was a total stranger, with wild eyes and a broad dangerous smile on her beautiful face. She was outfitted in a shiny black suit that

might have been painted onto her firm, perfect body, accommodating not only her well-formed muscles but also enough weapons to stock a small armory. Rowan could practically feel energy coming off her in waves so strong that there should have been sparks.

"Wow," breathed Waylander.

I'll drink to that, Rowan thought. She glanced at Jason and was amazed to see him stagger slightly and lower his blade slightly. The balance of power had definitely changed and so had their odds of survival, both for the better.

But who was she? A grunt that had been in cryostasis, maybe? Someone Brodski had been keeping in reserve, like a secret weapon in case of an emergency?

No, that was entirely too much to hope for. Wasn't it?

Rowan blinked; her vision seemed to give a little jump and she saw that the amped-up warrior woman standing as a challenge to Jason was Kay-Em.

She turned to Tsunaron intending to ask him what had happened and stopped. He had the same wild eyes, the same dangerous smile but his wardrobe left a lot to be desired. He wasn't actually wearing anything different but he looked a lot more rumpled, as if he had taken everything off and left it all in a heap to wrinkle before putting it back on again. Belatedly, she noticed a faint red smudge on his cheek and a mark on the side of his neck that could only be a hickey.

Tsunaron and Kay-Em? Rowan looked from one to the other, feeling dazed.

In the supply hold?

Rowan's mind was racing. It made sense—sex and survival, sex and violence. But good God, was everyone on this ship getting laid except her?

"I gave her an upgrade," Tsunaron said proudly.

The danger in Kay-Em's smile deepened as she stepped forward and produced a BFG bigger and more elaborate than anything the soldiers had carried.

"Fraid I'm gonna have to hurt you now," she told Jason in a low, lethal purr.

Rowan almost missed Jason's reaction entirely. It came in one smooth motion, so swift that it was almost over by the time she understood what was happening. The realization hit her at roughly

the same moment the machete hit Kay-Em's torso just below the rib cage.

Kay-Em looked startled, tried to take a step forward and pivoted on one foot to the right before dropping heavily to her knees. Her head tilted to one side in an almost quizzical manner and she seemed about to say something, perhaps even cry out in protest. But no sound came; her eyes went dead as her head dropped forward with a stiff, mechanical, and very final movement. Her dangerous smile was gone, leaving behind nothing more than an expressionless mannequin's face. Or a hockey mask.

SEVENTEEN

For some unmeasured period of time, no one spoke or moved. Then Janessa spoke up in a sad, meek little voice: "Well, that didn't go so well.

No shit, Rowan replied silently, watching as Jason stalked towards the motionless android. The anger that had been roiling around inside her had intensified several times over to a level that she imagined was as close to pure primal fury as someone with her social conditioning could ever get. It was burning hot and bitter freezing cold all at once and it suffused her body, mind, and spirit so thoroughly that she didn't feel it as much as she was possessed by it.

She was furious with Kay-Em for coming into the shuttle bay and giving them hope with her dangerous smile and her dangerous energy, furious with Tsunaron for the part he had played in making Kay-Em seem dangerous enough for them to believe in, furious with Jason for picking up his stupid machete after all, furious with the machete for hitting its mark, furious with Janessa and Waylander, furious with Kinsa for going crazy with fear and killing herself. Most of all, she was furious with a universe that would permit such a nasty, Rube Goldberg-style chain of events to occur in just the right way so that she would end up right here, in this very spot, right now, at this very moment.

Goddamn it, winning the state lottery probably would have taken half the number of events in a far less complicated sequence. Stupid fucking universe, Rowan fumed. Why did everything have to happen the hard way and hurt so much?

Jason braced one big boot against Kay-Em's shoulder and reached down to pull his machete out of her side.

Abruptly her head snapped up and she jammed the super-BFG into Jason's stomach. "Gotcha!" she whispered, her smile more dangerous than ever, and fired.

At last, Kay-Em thought with a warm glow of satisfaction as Jason Voorhees staggered backwards down the corridor she had just come

in from. At last she had gotten through to Tsunaron and made him understand what it was all about.

She had known it would take him quite a while to work it out and originally she had been prepared to wait. But in a matter of mere hours, circumstances had changed dramatically so that time was no longer on their side. Rather than simply allowing him to come to the inevitable conclusion by the more comfortable path of reason, she was going to have to resort to shock therapy. The options, always limited in some way, had been reduced to two and only two: shock or die.

Shock or die summed everything up succinctly. The straits they currently found themselves in, the complete process of catastrophe from the very beginning all the way through the recovery phase to the end, that original act of creation called, appropriately, the Big Bang. All the acts of creation that had occurred since seemed in some small sense to echo, even to salute, the one that started it all.

Tsunaron certainly had been shocked when she had grabbed hold of the back of his neck and kissed him. He was shocked at her initiating such an action and shocked at himself for carrying out the impulse to do the same thing at the same moment. He had been even more shocked at the outcome, the sharp increase in the likelihood of their survival. Complete understanding had hit him at exactly the same moment. She had seen it in his eyes.

Literally seen it in his eyes, that was. Tsunaron had built an elaborate system of macro-micro focusing into her vision and she had found that, among many other things, this allowed her to check everyone's eyesight as well as diagnose any injury and trauma involving blows to the head. More than that, however, she discovered she could often observe the physical process of thought, particularly Tsunaron's. Thought she could not read his thoughts exactly, she knew his psychology and his patterns of behavior so well that she could at least offer a reasonably good guess as to what was on his mind.

But then shock or die had half-blossomed, half-exploded in her just as one catastrophe sequence was about to end, and kicked off a new one. This was something that had never happened before. She had experienced catastrophes occurring in a rapid sequence where a new one would begin immediately after the previous one had

finished but they had always been discrete, as separate as pebbles. The causes might have been related but the catastrophes themselves had never been nested. One had never actually contained another.

The moment it had happened was like a bright, wonderful star in her awareness—suddenly and without warning, she understood infinity.

It was not mathematical infinity that she understood—that concept had always been part of her database. Mathematical infinity was as mundane as the commutative and associative properties of numbers or the absolute truth of $E=mc^2$.

The infinity she understood was not what made fractals, but the infinity that made fractals beautiful.

As always when she had a breakthrough, her learning process had immediately requested an association or reference. This time, it had been her understanding and not her database that had answered.

To see the world in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild
Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

For the eternity contained in a nano-second, human nature in the person of William Blake had been the sole focus of her infinite, undying love. Some time after that, she had emerged from each of the nested recovery phases to find herself in the human world, "world" being a human word that she understood meant much more than a planet.

Now all she had to do was convey all of this to Tsunaron in such a way that he would simultaneously understand and accept in the shortest possible period of time containing an eternity.

Shock or die. Wordless understanding was the quickest, she decided. His instinct to survive would seize on it immediately. Once survival was taken care of, he could indulge in the lifelong gratification of attempting to translate the wordless into coherent, pronounceable symbols. She knew that for Tsunaron, this would be something almost as much fun as sex.

Shock or die.

Fortunately, his body had been way ahead of him, which Kay-Em could see simultaneously scared and delighted him. Neither one stopped him from getting naked as he could.

He'd absolutely had to be naked and so had she, in spite of an all-too-obvious absence of certain physical characteristics. There was a risk that seeing the lack would be so jarring for him that he would suddenly shut down and run like hell in the opposite direction, either literally or figuratively, or both.

But shock or die meant she had to take that risk along with any others and hope for the triumph of momentum over inconveniently-timed higher brain function.

Shock or die. As they had rolled around on the floor of the supply hold together, she had watched him falling in love with her and then sinking into lust. She had seen him forget who she was as he urged himself more deeply into pure physical sensation, then recognize her by a private name secret even from her. She sensed his mind twisting and turning into numberless contortions, responding to the physical stimulation in the only way it could, while his body demonstrated just how much it wanted to go on living.

Afterwards, he had looked at her and at himself and said, "I kinda hate to tell you this, Kay-Em, but after all that adrenalin build-up, I would just as readily have done this with Janessa. I mean, I'm glad it was you but it was more gratuitous than anything else."

Shock or die. Later, when there was time, she would try to show him why this had increased their chances of survival to a level as close to one hundred percent as an infinite universe would allow in the small space of an eternity. In essence, it was another wordless thing but she found in her database a quantity of material from the twenty-first century writer M Swanwick. One observation in particular had jumped out at her:

Gratuitous sex is what distinguishes us from the lower animals and is absolutely crucial for the continuing survival of the human race.

It was far from the starry-eyed eloquence of William Blake, but it was every bit as true.

Shock or die. The force of her barrage sent Jason Voorhees flying the full length of the corridor as if he were a projectile himself, all the way to the cargo bay entrance.

"Yeah," Kay-Em said lasciviously and tossed the weapon over her shoulder to Tsunaron. The other three were all talking at once, pelting him with excited questions that he was actually trying to answer

Shock or die. If they wanted to watch, she would give them something they would never forget. Shock or die, folks—it's show time

Kay-Em let out a war-cry in a high, clear voice and flung herself forward in an impossible somersault, executing three full revolutions before she made a perfect three-point landing on a platform just a few feet away from where Jason was struggling to his feet. He wavered around unsteadily, putting his back to her as he tried to get his bearings.

"Hey," she whispered playfully.

The monster whirled and started to raise the machete. Immediately, the sidearms were out of her thigh holsters and in her hands and she was blasting away with both of them. They were modified versions of standard-issue military weapons, loaded with ammunition that she had amped up to a level illegal on Earth II.

Jason Voorhees staggered backwards, his body jerking with multiple impacts.

And now, watch this, Kay-Em thought at him and did a back flip off the platform onto the floor, landing close enough to plant a solid kick in the center of his torso. He should have folded in half but instead he only bent forward slightly. Kay-Em was disappointed but ready, meeting his face with another, harder kick that drove him back several steps. Still holding the sidearms, she moved with him, kicking his midsection again and again. It was like kicking a bag of rotting flesh, she thought; like kicking a corpse. A corpse that didn't have the sense or good manners to lie down.

He had almost come to a halt when she began firing again, forcing him to back away as she advanced on him. Waves of pleasure surged through her as chunks of flesh burst out of his chest, his shoulders, his legs.

Killing the monster is good, she thought. Destroying the threat is good. Protecting the mate is good. What served as her heart did not

pound but she was certain that she knew what it would have felt like if it had.

Abruptly, she was aware of Tsunaron and the others behind her and she felt her energy adjust sharply upward.

On with the show! Okay, everybody, watch this!

She twirled the sidearms like a Wild West gunfighter in a Prevac movie and slammed them back into their holsters. Rather than stopping there, however, she continued the motion so that she segued from reholstering her weapons to diving hands first towards the floor. At the same time, she flung her lower body up towards the ceiling, letting momentum take her easily into a series of rapid forward flips all the way down the hallway until she brought herself to a stop with a roundhouse kick to Jason's midsection.

He stumbled backwards into the main connecting hall of the *Grendel*, between the corridor leading to the cargo bay and the area where the laboratories were located. She thought she saw him make a move towards the cargo bay and the pleasure surging through her suddenly turned to rage.

You go where I tell you to go!

She somersaulted through the doorway and rebounded from the floor with a kick that finally put him down hard, flat on his back.

To have her enemy finally go down seemed to ignite a whole new reserve of energy in her. She let loose with another war cry as she hurled herself forward to land directly on top of him, her thighs straddling his chest.

Before he could move, she drew her sidearms again and pressed the barrels to either side of his head.

"Giddyap!" she said. For some reason, it was the first thing that occurred to her.

Something big flew up out of nowhere and smashed into her face. There was no pain as such, but she had not been ready and the blow sent her toppling over onto her right side, off-balance with the sidearms still in her hands. She moved to sit up but a large, heavy boot rammed into her midsection and shoved her down again.

Kay-Em gazed up at Jason darkly as he raised the machete. My enemy thinks he has me.

Suddenly, a third person confused the scene. It took at least a second before she understood that the figure clinging to the

monster's side was Brodski. As Jason struggled to get free of him, he let out a furious bellow of rage and drove a knife into the arm with the machete.

Jason staggered backwards and finally managed to shake Brodski off. Kay-Em sat up and smiled fondly at the soldier now lying on the floor a few feet away from her.

"I had it under control," she told him genially, "but thanks."

Grimacing in pain, Brodski pushed himself up on one elbow. "My pleasure," he said, barely able to get the words out but still managing to echo her tone of voice.

Kay-Em grinned, feeling a surge of deep kinship for the man. Tsunaron had always referred to Brodski as one tough son of a bitch, but until this moment, she had only caught the obvious meaning of that description. Now she knew that one tough son of a bitch was exactly the kind of human she wanted to be. Even after she was through here.

Jason tore Brodski's knife from his arm and took a step towards him, but Kay-Em had stepped in front of the soldier to shield him with her body. It was a damned good body, too, probably the best that any android had ever had, upgraded and nano-fortified to a degree that even she suspected might be illegal, at least technically. But, being one tough son of a bitch, she would deal with that later.

She heard Tsunaron call out Brodski's name and felt a renewed jolt of protectiveness. Her mate was close which meant he was also close to danger. She had to eliminate the threat standing in front of her. He was riddled with holes and oozing rotten black liquid instead of blood, and whatever he had inside of him that made him persist in spite of all his injuries was not anything like life, but he was still standing, still dangerous, and she had to get rid of him.

At the same time, she was seized with the overwhelming need to show off. Why not? Protect the mate? Yes! Survive? Yes, but with style! Jason stood watching her with his head tilted to one side; the hockey mask was as expressionless as ever but suddenly it made him seem more human, not less. She could have sworn she could pick up a mix of exasperation and impatience in his posture.

Inspiration bloomed like a hundred flowers in her matrix as she aimed the sidearms and fired into the wall around him. The armor-piercing ordnance punched through the metal with no trouble. Kay-Em sensed more than just confusion as he tried to look at the rough

oval perforating the wall around him without looking away from her. There was something frantic in his movements; not just frantic, but uncertain. Kay-Em realized that she had just successfully pulled off one of the rarest accomplishments of the last five hundred years.

She had surprised the monster. And all just because she had given in to the temptation to show off.

A mix of unabashed glee and satisfaction glowed inside of her. Unbidden, the memory of a word she had heard Azrael explaining to Dallas came to her: *kvell*.

Abruptly, Jason turned his attention from the outline of holes around him back to her. Evidently his evil killer pea-brain didn't waste a whole lot of time contemplating what it couldn't understand and went back to what it knew best. He started to raise the machete again.

"You just never change, do you?" Kay-Em said and shot off his arm. It dropped to the floor next to him with a small clang from the machete still clutched tightly in the gloved hand. He looked from it to the ragged stump of his arm and then back up at her. She had surprised the monster again, even more than the last time. "That was for Azrael," she added, just on the spur of the moment before she sprang at him to deliver a powerful kick to the chest.

Just as she had hoped, the perforations in the wall comprised too little contiguous metal to hold him. Jason's body hit squarely within the outline and it gave way, popping out like a cardboard cutout and letting him fall backwards into the room on the other side.

Ignoring the small bursts of sparks from torn power connections, Kay-Em stepped through the hole after him. He was getting back up on his feet again, she marveled as she reholstered her sidearms. What did he think he was going to do now?

Dangerous as hell, and dumb as a box of rocks. Who knew?

"Some never learn unless it's the hard way," she gave a vigorous shrug and the weapon that had been slung behind her back was in her hands. "Others just never learn." She allowed herself a moment to chuckle before she fired.

This was her favorite weapon. This was the one she had been most eager to use, possibly the only one she had actually needed, and certainly the most dramatic, in terms of results. But really, that just made it far more suitable for the grand finale.

The projectile exploded on impact with a glorious burst of light and bone-rattling noise. When the smoke cleared, he was still standing but only on his right leg. His left was gone.

Kay-Em waited as a second dragged by and he still didn't go down. Incredible. What was it with him? "You don't really think you have a leg to stand on, do you?" she said disdainfully.

Then he fell, almost as if he had needed the cue from her. He toppled over backwards onto something that collapsed under him with a crash of shattered glass and electronics and several small explosions strong enough to send sparks sailing across the room to bounce and die out at her feet while the floor shuddered.

This is Lab One, she realized belatedly. I kicked his ass all the way through the *Grendel* to Lab One. There was something very appropriate about the fight for survival coming to an end here, she thought. Although heads were going to roll when New Harvard got the bill for the damage.

Jason twitched and started to sit up.

"Hell with it. I'll tell 'em you said you'd cover it." She smiled and put a missile into the area where she estimated the gall bladder was located in a human. A river of thick black fluid poured out of the gaping hole and began spreading out on the floor. Probably safe to assume that wasn't genuine gall, she thought. "But close enough for government work," she added aloud, pleased with herself.

And still he struggled to sit up again. Kay-Em sighed noisily, laughing a little. "Are you really that stubborn?" she said. "Or is it actually just a complete lack of imagination on your part?"

As usual, he gave no sign that he had either heard or understood her. He only sat at the foot of the wrecked Nanotech 2000, black ooze dripping from the stump of his missing arm, splintered bone protruding through the torn, rotting flesh where his left leg had been. He was so riddled with holes that he should have had even less substance to him than the area of the wall she had shot out and kicked him through. There could not possibly be anything left to shoot, nothing that she could fire a missile at and actually hit.

All at once, inspiration bloomed again, making her smile. There was one thing.

She could tell that he was watching her as she took careful aim. Did he have any idea? Could he conceive even in the dimmest way

of what was going to happen next? Guess we'll never know, she thought and fired.

And even then, he remained sitting upright for a full second. Only now, she knew with absolute certainty that he was no longer looking at her. As evil and dangerous and stupid as Jason Voorhees might have been, even he couldn't continue to look at her or anything else with most of his head gone. The missile had punched away everything except for a vaguely crescent-shaped sliver of mask that ran from just under the left eyehole down to the center of his chin.

Kay-Em pursed her lips and blew out a small puff of air that wouldn't have extinguished a candle. Jason's body fell backwards against the slanted, ruined N2000 with a wet and very final-sounding thump.

"Yeah," she said and slung the missile launcher. She started to check on Brodski and then paused, looking at the mess in the laboratory. There was something missing here, some kind of finishing touch.

Her gaze fell on the arm she had shot off and the machete still in its hand. Immediately, she planted one foot on the wrist and bent down to rip the Weapon out of the dead fingers. What the hell, it was his, after all. She flipped the machete into the proper position and let fly.

It was a lousy throwing weapon but fortunately, that was no problem for her newly upgraded motor skills. The blade landed right in the center of his belly and stuck there.

Shock or die? No problem. I'll shock and you die.

She dusted her hands off and rolled her shoulders as Tsunaron and the others came to look at her unqualified victory.

"Kay-Em," Janessa breathed, touching her arm with tentative fingers. "Kay-Em, you did it!"

Tsunaron materialized on her other side. "KayEm," he said. "I... you... this..."

"Who's your momma?" She grabbed his head with both hands and gave him a lusty, warrior-woman victory kiss.

Now her work here was done.

EIGHTEEN

"God, what a mess!" said Waylander, holding Brodski up on the left. Supporting Brodski's other side, Rowan simply stared, unable to make a sound. Not because of the effort involved in holding Brodski up but because at the moment, it was too difficult to register the scene in front of her as being real.

Any minute now she would notice something moving, her mind was telling her in a calm, matter-of-fact way, and that would be Jason. She just couldn't see it yet because the light was bad and everyone being all emotional was distracting her. But any second now, her eyes would adjust to the gloom and she would see something twitching, something stirring, like his hand clenching and unclenching, which usually happened just before he sat up and started looking around to see where he had dropped his machete. That was not it sticking out of his gut, that was just an illusion produced by a shadow or a piece of wreckage.

Any second now, he was going to stir fitfully in that inimitable Jason Voorhees way of his and then sit bolt upright. And as soon as he did, the first thing he would see was her face. He would look right into her eyes and that would be his solemn and unbreakable promise to kill her. Better men and women than she hadn't been able to make him break that promise and she wouldn't do any better. This was not the end, not now, not ever, and she knew better than to even hope it might be. Any second now, she would have to face the truth, just like all the rest of Jason's victims. Nothing was over and she would see that any second now.

Any second now. Any second now.

Any moment now. She was suddenly aware that Brodski was watching her profile very closely, in spite of the obvious pain he was in.

"How are you doing there, Brodski?" she blurted. glad she was now looking at anything else but the monster in the laboratory.

"I'm okay," he said raspily. "You?"

She laughed in spite of herself. Not much and not hard, but it felt good. "I did come back for you. We came back for you, Waylander and I."

"Knew you would," Brodski managed with a grimace that was supposed to be a smile. "

Hey, let's get you patched up right now," Waylander piped up and shifted so that he was now supporting almost all of Brodski's weight. "Forget that fucking mess. We'll go to Lab Two."

Rowan kept a firm hold on Brodski's wrist with one hand, and wrapped her other arm around his upper body, hoping she wasn't putting pressure on any of his wounds directly or otherwise. If he and Waylander were going to act like she was too weak even to take half his weight, then fine. That didn't mean she couldn't put a comforting arm around him. And if she were honest, she would admit that she took at least as much comfort from the contact as she meant to give.

Rowan watched in amazement as lines of what looked like quicksilver emerged from several spots along the periphery of the table Brodski was lying on and glided up over his body. In a matter of seconds, his torso was encased in a cocoon of liquid chrome.

The explanation Tsunaron had given her about nano-mechanisms and their visible lines of force had been by necessity quick and dirty, and thus overly simplified, but to her it had been no less mind-boggling for all that. She felt the first feather touches of displacement and serious culture shock playing at the edges of her awareness. The scientific knowledge and background that had been vastly expert before Jason had plunged his machete into her stomach and taken her with him into cold sleep was now almost five hundred years out of date. If she hadn't understood that before, she was definitely starting to get the idea now.

She just hoped that five hundred years didn't constitute an unbridgeable gap, that she would be able to catch up and make a reasonably full and constructive life for herself. Everything she had seen since they had brought her back was fascinating and if she felt boggled or even disoriented by it, she was also experiencing a renewal of eager curiosity, the enthusiastic desire to know from her student days. For her, that was the best thing about being a student, as wonderful as falling in love. Maybe even more wonderful, because

you weren't just falling in love with a person, you were falling in love with the very essence of your life.

Although there's a lot to be said for falling in love with a person, too, she thought, glancing at Brodski's dark and very attractive features. He had passed out before she and Waylander had even gotten to the table with him. His dead weight had been too much for them even with Tsunaron and Janessa helping. Fortunately, Kay-Em was a superhero now. She had scooped him up in her arms like a sleeping child and positioned him on the table with no trouble at all.

This table, Kay-Em and Tsunaron had explained, was not quite as sophisticated as the N2000, which they had used to revive her and which was now scrap metal under the rotting carcass that was Jason Voorhees. The smaller table would still do the job but it would take more time to restore Brodski to his previous level of robust good health and fitness.

Under ordinary circumstances, this wouldn't have been more than an inconvenience. On a ship that had sustained as much damage as the *Grendel*, however, it could turn out to be a bad break for everyone, especially Brodski. They just had to hope that there wouldn't be any kind of major systemic failure or hull breach before Brodski was back to a hundred percent.

Rowan found herself hovering anxiously around the head of the table, unable to take her eyes off the man's face for more than a few seconds. Even after Tsunaron announced with obvious relief that Brodski's physical condition had been so superior that he was recovering more quickly than originally expected, Rowan stayed close, still watching him

. This was a dumb time to merely come down with a case of adolescent infatuation, much less actually indulge it, she scolded herself. What the hell was wrong with her? She was a grown-up. No, not only a grown-up but a scientist as well, a working expert with three doctorates and firsthand experience of Jason Voorhees, not a hormone-powered prom queen working as a camp counselor at Crystal Lake for the summer. She knew exactly what they were up against.

Abruptly she caught sight of Kay-Em perched on a nearby counter. She was busily checking her various weapons while at the same time

striking various sexy poses, obviously on purpose and obviously for Tsunaron's benefit.

Okay, but Kay-Em has no hormones at all. Explain that one, scientist.

Kay-Em suddenly looked over and gave her a sexy wink before turning her attention back to Tsunaron, who was keeping a careful eye on the displays and read-outs detailing Brodski's progress.

That's easy, piped up a little voice in her mind. If survival was all there was to it, you'd be a cow or a bird or an insect. But it's survival in order to enjoy all the things that make life worth living in the first place. It's not just good to be, it's good to be somebody in particular. It's good to be somewhere in particular and it's good to be with somebody else in particular.

Rowan felt her lips stretch in a small, secret smile. When this was all over, she would ask Brodski for a date or whatever people did these days. If that kind of intention actually increased the likelihood of her survival, she wasn't inclined to criticize it as trivial or irrelevant.

Her gaze fell on Janessa then, slumped in a chair. She was pale with fatigue and a certain amount of anxiety but in no way did she look unhappy. If anything, she might have been on the verge of a smile. Rowan felt a sudden rush of affectionate camaraderie for the girl. How the hell did that blouse stay on anyway? That was the first thing she was going to ask her as soon as they were all safe. The next thing she would ask was if people still went shopping in the year 2445, and if they did, what the best—

There was a deep, threatening rumble as a shudder went through the *Grendel*. It wasn't an especially violent shudder, nowhere near strong enough to knock any of them off their feet or disrupt Brodski's treatment. But there was a thoroughness to it that gave Rowan the impression that the ship's very structure was becoming increasingly precarious around them.

And if the expressions on everyone else's faces were any indication, she wasn't jumping at shadows, Rowan thought with a sinking sensation of impending doom in her stomach.

"What's going on?" Janessa asked, getting up and going over to Waylander, who was already sitting at a console and studying the

monitor with a frown while his fingers danced rapidly on two separate keyboards.

"Way?" she prodded, her voice high and tight. "Talk to me, what's going on?"

Waylander looked at her and then at everyone else. "We've got trouble."

"No shit!" Janessa retorted, sounding close to tears now. "What kind?"

"The collision with Solaris compromised the hull. We're bleeding out." He tapped something on the console and jerked his chin at a large wall monitor which was now displaying a 3D wireframe schematic of the ship with the problem areas highlighted in red. Rowan went over for a closer look, marveling at how the *Grendel* really was built exactly like a catamaran. She would have to find out who had first thought of applying the layout to a space ship. She could see the practicality, but they would have done better to think of some way to isolate any damaged sections so they wouldn't cripple or kill the whole ship.

All at once, a new voice spoke up in the lab. "*Tiamat* to *Grendel*, we have received your distress beacon. Do you copy?"

Rowan heard the words with no problem but they made absolutely no sense to her. She turned to Kay-Em, intending to ask her if she knew what that was, but then Janessa pounced on the comm, laughing and crying at the same time as she answered the hail.

"*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel* and that's a great big fat affirmative! How soon can you be here? Our situation is extremely critical."

"We're four parsecs away, *Grendel*," came the reply, cheerful and business-like all at once, as if whoever they were talking to spent every day coming to the rescue of people whose ships were about to blow up. "We can be with you in forty-five minutes."

And then, as if to add to the sudden turnaround in their circumstances, Brodski raised himself up on one elbow. Rowan helped him sit up the rest of the way, grinning so widely that her face was actually starting to ache. Then she caught sight of Waylander and the expression on his face hit her like a physical blow to the stomach.

"*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel*," he said in a low grave voice as he nudged Janessa away from the comm. "We don't have forty-five

minutes. Our hull is bleeding out at a rate that guarantees we'll have a core implosion in thirty minutes. Do you copy?"

Rowan could hear the person on the other end of the comm hesitate.

"We copy you, *Grendel*," he said finally. "Advise how you would like us to proceed?"

Waylander turned to look at each one of them in turn, ending with Janessa who was staring desperately into his face, tears running down her cheeks.

"We'll just end up taking them down with us," Waylander said to her. "That's not right and you know it." He took a breath. "*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel*. If you can't get here in thirty minutes," another breath, then there's no point."

"Are you high?!" Janessa backhanded his arm hard enough to make him step back from the comm. "*Tiamat*, you ignore that last idiot, all right? You just get your ass out here, okay? You come here right now, you come here and you save us!"

I can't take this, Rowan thought, dazed. A strange numbness seemed to be filling her up inside, a feeling of needles and pins that was more emotional than physical. Or was she actually emptying out rather than filling up? Or shutting down, perhaps? Extreme fluctuations in the areas of hope and despair have resulted in catastrophic system meltdown. I'm not meant for this. In my day, when you reached the point where you were facing certain death, that was it. You only had to do that one time and after that, you were done. It was over for good.

Even as the thoughts were reeling through her head, another part of her brain had seized on something else. Suddenly, she found herself staring at the schematic on the wall display and what she saw now seemed as obvious as Brodski's rock-hard abs.

"Hey, guys," she said, surprised at the almost casual sound of her own voice, "why can't we just go over here?" She moved to the screen and indicated the bridge section, the right hull, and the three walkways connecting them.

"No good," Tsunaron said promptly. "When this hull blows, it'll take the bridge with it."

"Not if we disconnect these walkways," she said, pointing to them again.

Waylander gave a short, bitter laugh. "We can't just disconnect them," he said.

"We could blow them up."

Rowan felt something very much like a charge in the air as everyone turned to look at Brodski. He was looking only at her with an expression that said she was definitely onto something. Suddenly she became aware of how hard her heart was pounding, almost as if it had stopped beating sometime before and had only just started up again.

"There's plenty of macro-charge in the weapons hold," Tsunaron said.

"All right then." Brodski hopped down off the table and looked around. "Let's do it."

Waylander turned back to the comm immediately "*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel*. We're gonna try something here. If you're game, maintain your current course and speed and hopefully, we'll see you when you get here."

"Roger that," replied the other, sounding equally hopeful. "See you in forty-five. Good luck all the way, *Grendel*. *Tiamat* out."

Waylander had barely gotten the last word out before they were all running for the weapons hold with Brodski in the lead. If this worked, Rowan thought, she was going to borrow Janessa's shirt for her date with Brodski. And if it didn't, maybe she'd have time before the ship blew up to slit her wrists with Jason's machete.

NINETEEN

Near the end of the evening on the night before Brodski had taken leave of his enormous extended family to begin a new life in the military, his paternal great-grandmother Cosima had asked him to escort her to her room in the family mansion. It was a request she had made many times before. Brodski was her favorite and everyone knew it, including Brodski himself. The feeling was mutual, so he was always happy to comply.

On this particular evening, however, he felt a bit nervous as they went upstairs together, the old Woman seated as always on the E-Z Stair-Chair Lift while the little boy climbed the steps in the more usual fashion, carefully matching his pace to her rate of ascent. Of everyone in the family, Cosima had been the most opposed to his entering the military while his age was still in single digits, and the most vocal, even more so than his father. At times, the boy thought she was not merely against the idea but seriously angry with him as well for even just considering such a thing, to a degree where she actually felt he had wronged her.

She didn't say anything at all to him on the way to her room, which only made him more nervous, Cosima had never mistreated him in any way, never taken anything out on him no matter how bad she might have been feeling, never even raised her voice even when she was bringing him up short about something he had done wrong.

But this was something else entirely. His leaving meant he was making significant, permanent changes not only in his own life but also in hers, and there was nothing she could do about it. He could understand how she might feel frustrated and hurt at having such a drastic change forced on her. In the eight short years that he had been around, he'd had to put up with a few things himself.

Nonetheless, he knew in his heart that this was the right thing for him and he wished she could see that, too. He would have been only too glad to explain it to her but he didn't know how. As bright as he was, he was still only eight years old; he didn't know where to begin.

Fortunately, she had not asked for his company so she could berate him or make one last stab at trying to make him change his mind. She had only wanted him to kiss her good night one last time

before he left, just to show him she was conceding and the matter was closed. She had given him a few small keepsakes: a miniature photo album, a medallion on a chain, and an unabridged chip edition of *Gulliver's Travels*. Then she had kissed him good night and good luck and sent him on his way.

Just as he was closing the door behind him, she said one last thing. "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans." She had actually muttered it under her breath so softly that it was only pure chance that he'd heard it and he knew that she had not been addressing this comment to him. In any case, he didn't go back and ask her what she meant, although he had really wanted to.

Later on, when he found out what it meant, he was even more intrigued by the question of whom she could have been referring to. Him? Herself? His parents or the whole family in general? He never did get an opportunity to find out and the mystery clung to the edge of his mind like a small burr. It was a damned clever, and cleverly-worded, bit of wisdom. But it was not knowing who Cosima had been thinking of that had made it stick in his mind, unsaid and unused, sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, mostly subliminal.

It was the furthest thing from his thoughts as he broke out the macro-charges in the supply hold and with was making sure that the three surviving students understood that they had to plant their handed them out. The only thing he was concerned charges exactly where he showed them on the schematic. He demonstrated the correct way to make a quick measurement that would be precise to within half an inch, and then insisted on using up a couple of precious minutes testing each of them, just to be sure they weren't merely smiling and nodding.

To his relief, each of the students got it right on the first try. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised given Lowe's policy of accepting only genius-level intellects for the course, but he felt better knowing for sure. Just because they were geniuses didn't necessarily mean they had any common sense. And hell, they weren't grunts, they were students, career civilians, greener than green. For the untrained, sense tended to evaporate completely in the face of danger, real or otherwise.

Brodski had no such qualms about Rowan, however. If they'd had even just a little more time before the *Grendel* blew, he'd have told

the students to stay put in the lab while the two of them took care of planting the charges. He found himself wondering if that would have been the wiser course of action despite the limited amount of time even as he sent them all off to the areas he had designated. Standard procedure demanded that there always be one reliable party monitoring the situation.

The problem was picking someone to do that. The girl was out of the question. Either one of the guys would have been okay, but he was actually depending on them to look after the girl in the event she went to pieces and lost it at a critical moment

Kay-Em, he remembered suddenly, wasn't a student any more than Rowan was. Hell, she had put the monster down when the rest of them had failed. But that was all the more reason he needed her in action. And Rowan was too much of an alien to leave on her own...

Nah, it was a big waste of time trying to second-guess himself at a time like this. He had to stay in the immediate present, stay focused on doing each thing that he had to do as he had to do it, which included making sure everyone else did the same. There was no going back now that the plan had been put into motion. Blowing off the worst of the damage was the only way to buy enough time for the *Tiamat* to reach them. Then they could go home and if he were still inclined to second-guess himself after that, he wouldn't be wasting anyone's time but his own. Although he actually had other, far better things in mind for the immediate future, he thought as he and Rowan readied the last of the charges.

The idea of making God laugh, either inadvertently or on purpose, never entered his head.

It would probably have surprised Brodski to find that Rowan was also familiar with the old saying; however, it never crossed her mind, either, except perhaps in the most oblique and absent way. Most of the plans she had heard in the last four hundred and forty-five years had been laughable but they hadn't made her laugh and it had never occurred to her to wonder about God's sense of humor.

At the moment, her thoughts were more or less an echo of Brodski's. She had not forgotten about the ruins of the monster lying in rotten chunks among the wreckage of the amazing medical table

that had resurrected her. Jason Voorhees was the reason they were all in this fix in the first place.

At the same time, however, she had forgotten everything about him. She had forgotten her stab wound from the machete, forgotten about Lowe playing the valuable scientific artifact card to justify keeping Jason while insisting he was very dead. She had forgotten proving he was wrong and she had forgotten what she had been right about. She had forgotten where they had left Jason, forgotten that he was unguarded, unrestrained, and most of all undead.

To be perfectly fair, however, it was not simply a matter of what Rowan LaFontaine had forgotten; it was also what she didn't know to begin with. For one thing, she didn't know that as Jason had been thawing out in Lab Two, the table he lay on had automatically made a full-body scan and filed the data in general access storage for later reference. She also didn't know that Tsunaron had not completely de-activated the nano-ants after they had finished with Brodski. She didn't know anything about nano-ants except for the fact that they had saved her life as well as Brodski's, putting their broken bodies back together again without leaving so much as the tiniest scar.

She didn't know, and she never stopped to wonder, if the ants worked only on humans.

In 2445, molecular machines were not something for people to marvel at any more than Rowan and her twenty-first-century contemporaries found a crescent wrench worthy of awe. Granted, there was no comparison in their respective levels of sophistication, but without an energy source and the appropriate software, nano-ants might as well have been any other tool in a cupboard, although too small to see without an electron microscope.

The energy source was the easy part. It didn't take much to power anything on the nano-level, but it was the software that made all the difference. Ants could do only what a program told them to do, no more and no less. Therefore if you somehow managed to throw yourself into a refuse pit where ants were busily converting trash into

something more useful, or at least less offensive smelling, you were in no danger of being turned into a puddle of human tapioca. The ants worked only on trash and since a live human body didn't fit the parameters, they would have ignored you.

Needless to say, they were expensive. As easy as they were to power and deploy, they were hard to keep track of. Software, never cheap, only became more expensive and, as always, had to be purchased separately. Then there were the glowing lines of force. It cost a considerable amount to produce what was nothing more than a clever special effect but no one ran nano-ants without them. It just wasn't done.

If Tsunaron gave any thought to the nano-ants at all, it was to note in a very absent way that after the dust settled, some New Harvard bean counter was going to pitch a bitch about how no one had tried to salvage them from the *Grendel's* labs.

But that was all. They were lucky the ship held together long enough with the right things functioning so they could all keep breathing as well as treat Brodski's wounds. Salvage? They had salvaged themselves and it hadn't been easy.

And even if the *Grendel* hadn't been on the verge of breaking up, Lab One was still a total loss. Automatic weapons fire had reduced all the hardware to junk and then Jason Voorhees had finished off the table when he had fallen on it. One end had collapsed underneath him while the other hung from the control bank by a couple of cables; it looked like a slant-board in a high-tech gym that had gotten seriously busted up in a brawl. Nothing else was going to happen in there before the *Grendel* finally came apart; nothing else could.

Unfortunately, there was no programming or any other sort of instruction functioning well enough to let the nano-ants know that.

Having finished repairing Brodski, the ants returned to their holding areas within the table and the default setting of Neutral—Ready, awaiting the next command. Whether that was making another repair

or de-activation didn't matter. They were machines. It was all the same. Had Tsunaron deactivated them.

But he hadn't. The prospect of surviving Jason Voorhees only to face certain death by explosive decompression in the vacuum of space followed by a chance of reprieve had taken a toll on his concentration. Further complicating his state of mind was the fact that in spite of the circumstances, he now found himself in a continuous and uninterrupted state of arousal. He was set on rapid simmer. Hot to trot. Horny as an ape.

In spite of the circumstances? Ha—because of them! Horny as an ape was right: a struggle on the primal level, sudden death in all directions, heart pounding, adrenalin pumping, nerves jumping. In fighting for his life, he had never felt so alive, or so lively.

Hell, even the breakfast dishes still sitting unwashed on the table in his quarters had slipped his mind. Memory being the quirky thing that it is, he probably would have remembered he hadn't El done them before he remembered not deactivating the ants.

The Nanotech 2000 medical table was remarkable not only for its capacity but for the Artificial Intelligence that ran its operating system. It was a limited AI, in that it was dedicated, or dumber-down as the less charitable put it, to repair and restoration, medical or otherwise. Many times, there was some quantity of original material missing, which meant the ants would draw on some alternative provided by the human operator to fill in the lack.

If no substance had been provided, the ants could be instructed either to wait for some or to make use of anything available. Even the only moderately experienced nanotechnologists knew that the latter setting was only good if you felt the bizarre need to

cannibalize expensive hardware every time you used it. Exactly why such an option had been included—hardwired, in fact—was something no one seemed to know. But no one questioned it, either, nor did most people bother taking the time and trouble to disable it. Since they weren't ever going to use that setting, it was all the same. Wasn't it?

It would have been if no one on the Grendel had made use of this option. But Janessa had. She had found it extremely convenient

when she had been working with her biological specimens, the ones Tsunaron had referred to as her love children. This option allowed her to place incomplete or damaged specimens on the table with an assortment of different materials and substances, and the ants would automatically use whatever was most suitable. This method saved her considerable amounts of time and energy which she put to better use in a non-laboratory setting.

The Nanotech 2000's AI would not have defaulted to Janessa's favorite option just on its own, nor would it have summoned the ants from Neutral—Ready just because it sensed the presence of a specimen on the surface of the table as part of its normal function.

But it wasn't functioning normally. It was damaged. Not badly enough so it wouldn't work, just enough so it would work badly. Small power surges came in spasms and the software responded to the input by translating it into commands. Some of the commands were complete gibberish and the software ignored these, letting them evaporate from volatile memory without saving.

But not all of the input translated as garbage; there were standard, familiar commands embedded here and there in an otherwise meaningless series of symbols. The software presented this to the damaged AI that concluded that this was just a standard case of encryption.

A percentage of the instructions it decrypted were contradictory; the AI determined this was simply a second level of encryption. Meanwhile, circuits continued to short out, power surged, faded, and surged again, software hiccupped, reset, jumped, interpreted noise as information and vice versa. In the end, the AI decided to search for precedent. It compared current conditions to recent prior activity in its log to see what previous action, if any, had been taken under similar circumstances.

There was no exact match of conditions but the AI had been programmed to allow for variables that were inevitable where humans were involved. No event ever matched any other event precisely, because humans never did anything the same way twice. However, nothing ever showed up as unique either.

It wasn't long before the AI found a reasonable match for the current conditions. The match was only partial—there was a high degree of variation surrounding the logged event compared to the

current state of affairs, but the elements involved were focal, possibly even crucial. Therefore, the AI concluded in its non-conscious, mechanical way, the previous course of action applied. The last time there had been a fragmented specimen on the table, the ants had been deployed to repair it using any available resources and following the schematic of its original form, accessible in the databank. Any portions of the specimen that could not be recreated should be improved instead.

Abruptly, another small circuit somewhere blew out and the software gave a hiccup that shortened the instructions to improve any portions of the specimen.

That settled, the ants in Lab One went to work, their slightly depleted ranks filled in by the complement that swarmed in from Lab Two.

Even if Brodski or Rowan had had the presence of mind to insist that someone stay in the lab and keep an eye on Jason through the broken window partition, it might not have made any difference simply because this time when the ants went into action, there was nothing to see. Thanks to a combination of hardware and software damage, the relatively minor frills had been the first to go. The motion of the ants generated no perceptible signs at all. No silvery lines of force, no barely-visible fog-colored shapes gliding along the floor like ghostly worms, not even a spot or two of gray static.

Actually, that wasn't quite true. Someone with quick wits and exceptional powers of observation, Brodski maybe, or Kay-Em for sure, might have detected a rippling motion in the air like a heat shimmer. This was, in fact, produced by the presence of an exceptionally dense concentration of nano-ants. The combined friction of their movements literally heated the air.

Once the ants swarmed over Jason's remains, the heat shimmers became more pronounced. Not just because of the enormous number of mechanisms involved but because of the materials they were working with. With so much metal, the sharp rise in temperature was unavoidable.

It was nowhere nearly extreme enough to affect the ants one way or the other. The specimen didn't seem to mind, either, but then, the

ants wouldn't have known if he had.

Five minutes later, they were finished.

Waking this time was not a gradual fading in of awareness but a sledgehammer blow. Jason's eyes flew open as the ants finished restoring and improving his vision and streamed away in search of something else to work on. There was no disorientation, no confusion, nothing except himself, reborn in entirety.

For the first time ever he was whole, no longer in pieces. The hockey mask, the machete, even his clothes were all gone as separate things. Instead, they were one with him, and he was one with them. He was complete, the way he should have been all along.

All Jason Voorhees. All anti-life. All the time.

TWENTY

Working as quickly as she could, Rowan emptied third locker of its macro-charges and moved on to the next one. So far she had found fifteen of the domed devices which were about twice the size of her hand and looked to her like a cross between a snow-globe and a handheld electronic game. Some had blue stripes around the central dome while others had red. Brodski had told them to skip the red ones as they were merely flashbangs.

"Non-lethal but highly effective for winning arguments, scaring bullies, and getting rid of party guests who don't know when to leave," he'd told her with a barely-perceptible grin. "In short, a guaranteed buzz-kill but no good to us right now."

"Buzz-kill?" She couldn't help laughing

"That is slang from your, uh, home time, isn't it?" Brodski had said. "Or did Lowe get that wrong, too?"

She was still chuckling a little to herself as she collected the real explosives, although it struck her as rather odd that they hadn't stored the two things separately. A classic example of that old saw about the right way, the wrong way, and the army way, perhaps.

There were only half a dozen more in the next three lockers; Waylander, Tsunaron, and Janessa had picked the rest of them clean, giving them a grand total of fifty charges. Each one had to be primed and activated by hand, which Brodski and Kay-Em took care of. Ten of the fifty turned out to be duds but Brodski assured them that forty would be more than enough to do the job.

While Kay-Em divided the remaining charges among several carrier bags, Brodski put the schematic of the walkways up on a monitor in the wall and pointed out where each charge had to be placed. Then he went through it a second time before insisting that each of them repeat all of it back to him.

Rowan tried to control her impatience. He had to do it this way, she told herself; none of them were demolitions experts, or even grunts. He had to make sure they understood exactly what they had to do. At the same time, her anxiety was building to the point where she felt that at any moment she was going to jump out of her skin and run away screaming. The friggin' ship was on the verge of blowing up altogether. How hard could it be to get rid of three little walkways?

Finally, he gave Waylander and Janessa one bag while Kay-Em and Tsunaron took another. "We'll split up and set the charges," he said, passing out earpiece comm-links to all of them. "Who's got the remote?"

"Right here," said Waylander, patting a small black box taped to his belt.

"Good. Meet up in walkway B as soon as you're done. Go."

As soon as the other four left, he turned to Rowan and put his hands on her shoulders. The serious look in his eyes was suddenly terrifying.

"I'm going to take a couple of charges and plant them near the core," he told her in a low, tense voice. "You take care of walkway B. When the others arrive, you verify they closed the doors to A and C behind them after setting their charges. Unless I tell you otherwise, keep the door to walkway B open until I get there. And make sure they all stay out of it. Nobody goes in. I don't want anybody setting foot on that walkway and then suddenly deciding they left their teddy bear on the other side that they have to go get. Got it?"

"I got it," Rowan said a bit uncertainly "But to be honest, I seriously doubt anyone would run over there for a million dollars. Or whatever you use now." ,

Brodski gave a short humorless laugh. "You'd be surprised what comes over some people." Pause. "If one of them does break out in galloping head bugs, you don't go after them, no matter who it is. You hear me? I'll go after them because that's my job," he added as she started to protest.

"Okay." Rowan took the bag from him and headed for walkway B.

Before Janessa and Waylander had even reached the walkway and begun positioning their charges according to Brodski's instructions, Jason Voorhees was back on his feet. His new and very much improved feet which, like the rest of his new and very much improved body, combined the best features of organic and inorganic matter without any of their drawbacks. A flexible, impenetrable epidermis laid over supple steel and impervious tissue. Under that, there was a highly complex internal scheme of operations that would shift and adapt as necessary, according to the demands placed on it

as well as to compensate for any damage done to it, if any, while repairs were in progress.

Of all the upgrades the ants had performed on Jason, it was his system of regeneration that had needed the least amount of tweaking. In fact, it had not been upgraded so much as simply updated and reinforced. No doubt it would have worked just as well in the new, improved body as it had in the old one with no changes whatsoever. But the ants had their orders to improve the specimen, and they carried them out in the only way they knew how, by adding themselves to the regenerative process.

The new and improved Jason Voorhees was unaware of their presence in his body, but then the body he inhabited was no longer a combination of parts. It was an unbroken, uninterrupted, perfectly contiguous unit, a single, self-contained cell of anti-life and it inhabited him as much as the other way round. The time and space he inhabited was equally unbroken and contiguous; every place was here, every moment was now. There was still no life in him, no life at all, and never would be. But although he did not live, he did exist, and with a force that was the equal of any life, every life, all life.

Existing here and now, he had an even more acute sense of all that lived. But he could also sense something else, something he had never encountered before. He did not know the word birth or even the concept; the closest equivalent for him was fire, a small flame growing into a big flame, stronger, brighter, hotter. Something becoming alive or learning to be alive? Something willfully imbuing itself with life? No matter; he didn't actually puzzle over the thing. Even though he could have given over the requisite amount of processing for that kind of mental activity, he didn't bother. This thing was as much an offense to him as anything that lived in the usual way; that was all he needed to know about it.

The name of the thing that rose from the floor in Lab One was Jason Voorhees, not only technically but also permanently. The nerve impulses that had been produced in him in response to his name had been documented, coded, and hardwired into his undead tissue so that it was as much anti-life as everything else in his nature.

The ship trembled around him as he moved through it. Conduits cracked and broke apart, some of them spewing poison into the air but that didn't matter because he had never needed oxygen anyway. The lights failed, sometimes exploding in a starburst of sparks, sometimes simply going dark, but that didn't matter either because his new and improved eyes let him see under any conditions

As he got closer to where the live humans were scrambling around desperately with their little machines and tools, the ship's trembling became more violent and he knew the whole thing was going to fail soon. He had to get to the humans before that happened. He had to slaughter each and every one of them himself. That was what he was here for; that was why he was and it was why they were. He could not simply let them die as a matter of circumstance. If he did, there would be no point.

Jason Voorhees was anti-life. His existence was not pointless.

Rowan had imagined that it would take only a few minutes to place the charges and set them all on the right channel for simultaneous detonation. Even if she double—and triple—checked the coordinates for each placement using the manual grid function so that the position of every explosive was precise to within half an inch, she hadn't thought it would take any longer than ten minutes max—nine and a half if she fumbled all the settings and had to zero out.

What she hadn't taken into account was the instability of the *Grendel* that kept throwing her off balance so that she was staggering around like a drunk. When she wasn't falling flat on her ass. It was a good thing the explosives she was handling were inert to everything except a signal from the detonator in Waylander's possession.

Trying to position them correctly while the *Grendel* rattled and pitched like the more familiar kind of catamaran bounding over a choppy ocean, however, was nowhere near as easy as it had looked her mind's eye. And as if that wasn't enough to complicate matters, it wasn't just the ship that was trembling.

Rowan was appalled to see how badly her hands were shaking. No, not just her hands but her entire body. What the hell could have triggered such a reaction, and why now? It wasn't like the last few had been quiet and she had managed not to lose it even when Kinsa

had wiped herself out along with their means of escape. When she and Brodski had parted company outside the weapons hold, she had felt steady enough. Anxious and scared, sure, but also focused and determined. Focused on doing good to go. Not exactly cool and calm, maybe, but still damned steady.

She tried to concentrate on attaching the last walkway charge in her bag to a spot on the curved wall slightly below eye-level but it was no good. Her hand could not have shaken any harder if she had been standing outside naked on a winter night in the Arctic. She tried grabbing hold of her wrist with her other hand. It almost worked; the tremors seemed to die down for a second but then she felt them coming back even more strongly than before.

Abruptly she half-lunged, half-fell forward and stuck the charge firmly onto the wall. The read-out near the bottom of the mechanism told her she had hit the mark exactly. Relieved, she kept hold of the charge, thinking she could steady herself that way. Instead, her body began to shake more violently and she finally let go.

At the same moment, the *Grendel* lurched to one side and sent her sprawling towards the wrong end of the walkway. Several deep, ominous booming sounds came from part of the ship as she struggled to regain her feet.

"Come on, now, hold together, baby," said a voice behind her. She turned to find that Tsunaron and Kay-Em were now in the walkway with her. She tried to motion them back but the ship lurched again just as Janessa and Waylander arrived, pitching them into the walkway area as well. Waylander managed to catch himself just before he would have landed directly on top of Janessa; unfortunately, he also managed to hit the control panel next to the entrance and shut the door. Goddamn it, Rowan thought, fighting to get to her feet; Brodski was going to think she'd had a brain-ectomy.

"What the hell is that?" Janessa asked fearfully.

"Just guessing, I'd say it's the ship trying to come apart," Tsunaron told her, but not in a particularly unkind or sarcastic way.

"No, not that—that," she said. Rowan looked at her, bewildered. "Can't you hear it? Like someone's coming?"

Her voice cut off and she simply stared, her mouth open and her eyes wide, at something behind Rowan down at the other end of the walkway. That door was still open, Rowan remembered, flicking a

glance towards the other one, the one that shouldn't have been closed. On the side where they were supposed to be waiting for Brodski.

That was the safe side, where nothing bad would happen to them before the *Tiamat* finally showed up and took them all to a place that was genuinely safe.

But Janessa was staring at the dangerous side, the side they had to get rid of because all the air was bleeding out. She could hear things exploding on that side, she could hear metal crumpling and groaning. It was bad on that side; they would die on that side.

They had left Jason on that side.

No, she declared silently, trying not to turn and follow Janessa's gaze, not just hers but everyone else's, all with the same expression of horrified disbelief. No.

The floor trembled under her threateningly.

She didn't have to turn around. She didn't have to see whatever was there. Because whatever it was, it wasn't... wasn't. It wasn't. It wasn't.

"Impossible!" Waylander yelled. Rowan had a glimpse of him shaking his head slowly from side to side before she turned around completely. "He's dead. He's dead!"

"I'd say he got better," Rowan heard herself say faintly.

"He's been modified," Kay-Em remarked, her tone surreally conversational, as if they were all chatting over coffee.

"Oh, well, gosh, ya think?" Janessa said shrilly.

"Can you take him?" asked Tsunaron.

Rowan turned to look at him in utter confusion. Then Kay-Em was hauling her to her feet and pushing her towards the safe end of the walkway and she realized that Tsunaron's question had not been meant for Janessa.

"I can try," Kay-Em said, walking towards the impossible nightmare in the open doorway. Rowan watched as she drew both sidearms and fired.

Were the rounds bouncing off or disintegrating, Rowan wondered? And did it make any difference either way?

He's been modified.

Kay-Em holstered her weapons and threw herself forward in a series of powerful flips, stopping directly in front of Jason and kicking his head.

Nothing happened.

He's been modified.

Kay-Em kicked him twice more. With an easy, almost casual movement, Jason put a hand around Kay-Em's neck. She had just enough time to look over her shoulder and say, in a maddeningly reasonable way, "You guys might want to run."

Then Jason brought his other fist up and suddenly Kay-Em's head was half-bouncing, half-rolling on the floor. It came to rest with her calm, pretty face looking directly at all the rest of them with an expression that seemed to say, why are you all still here?

TWENTY-ONE

"Kay-Em!" Tsunaron dived towards the android's head as Jason discarded the rest of her with a careless flick of his wrist. His new, improved wrist. Don't forget, he's been modified, Rowan's mind prompted, echoing the insane matter-of-factness of the last few things Kay-Em had said. He's been modified. I can try. You guys might want to run.

Yes, indeed, she might very much want to do exactly that, run like mad without stopping, Rowan thought, watching as Jason advanced on Tsunaron who was cradling Kay-Em's head in his visibly shaking arms. In truth, she most definitely wanted to run like hell without stopping right now. In fact, there would probably never be a better time for something like that, running like mad without stopping, than right at this moment. By now, Jason was raising his machete; his new, improved machete, no less modified than any other part of him and preparing to bring it down in an arc that appeared to be directly in line with Tsunaron's neck. Preparing to cut off his head, as well, because two heads were better than one. So, yeah, she might want to run now.

Then she hurled herself forward.

She caught Jason's arm with both hands and, incredibly, held it in mid-air just short of midstroke. Held it? No, not exactly; not hardly. What she had done was surprise the hell out of the monster to the point of distracting him from completing his intended action, thus saving Tsunaron's life. Or more likely just adding a few seconds to it.

Hadn't added any to her own, though. Jason's big left hand was wrapped around her throat now and she dangled from his fist like a rag doll, her feet several inches above the metal floor. Gasping for air as she felt him tighten his grip—his new, improved, modified grip, dontcha know, whispered some psycho voice in her head—Rowan tugged at his hand with both of hers and then suddenly found herself staring directly into his eyes.

She had never been so physically close to Jason before, she realized, not even centuries ago when he had killed her. He had red eyes; blood-red, burning, and brutal; as inhuman and un pitying as the beaten and scuffed piece of impassive white plastic that had

hidden his face before, and the bizarre steel artifact that had replaced it.

The thing was strapped to the front of his head like a mask but it was not impassive, not in any way. Nor did it really hide anything. This was no disguise; this was something from a nightmare realm of gargoyles and grotesques and grisly death. This was Jason Voorhees's true face, more than anything else ever had been or ever could be, even the flesh and blood features he had been born with

No, especially those. Because this was not simply the real face Jason had always worn when he looked at the world, it was the face that the world had shown Jason.

Dark patches started to swim through Rowan's vision as the hand around her neck squeezed even more tightly and she wondered if she were going to suffocate before Jason got around to cutting her head off. Or maybe compared to his new, improved, modified state, she was now too insignificant a creature for that kind of death.

But even as everything continued to go dark around her, she could still see those burning red eyes glaring, boring into her. He remembered her; he knew who she was and what she was. Like all the rest of his victims, she was each and every hateful thing that had ever hurt him in any way and to any degree, whether slight or great.

All at once she found herself flat on her back on the floor, holding her bruised throat and breathing in and out in great, panting whoops. Somewhere behind her, Janessa was screaming something about running right now and Brodski where the fuck are you and Waylander, no, no, don't!

Rowan raised herself up on one elbow, holding her neck with one hand and had a brief glimpse of Jason standing over her and struggling with someone who had grabbed him from behind.

"Get out!" Waylander was hollering. "Get out now! Run! Run!"

She pushed herself to her knees, her breath coming a little easier now but the muscles in her throat so painful now that swallowing brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them away just in time to see Jason yank Waylander off his back and fling him away. Waylander flew several feet through the air, hit the wall hard, and slid down to the floor with the lower half of his body twisted around in a way that meant he would not be getting up again.

"No..." Rowan moaned and Jason turned to look at her again. At the same moment, someone grabbed hold of her roughly and half-pulled, half-dragged her to her feet. She tried to reach for Waylander but he shook his head emphatically.

"Go! Run! Get out now!" he shouted. Rowan was horrified to see blood glistening on his lower lip. Janessa was pulling her towards the now-open door on the safe side of the walkway, all the while screaming for Brodski.

Even as they stumbled through the door together, it was closing again. Still clutching Kay-Em's head, Tsunaron dived through the steadily shrinking gap barely a moment before it would have been too small for him. Janessa had stopped screaming for Brodski and was now simply screaming in wordless terror at the door to walkway B, as if she believed screaming would somehow fortify the door.

"What's the matter?" Brodski seemed to materialize in the midst of them out of nowhere. "What the hell is going on?"

"Jason fucking Voorhees, that's what's going on," Rowan said, grimacing at the pain in her throat. "Something put him back together again..."

Brodski went to have a look through the thick glass window in the door. Jason's new steel face appeared on the other side and Rowan tried to cry out and warn Brodski to step back, the door wouldn't protect him no matter how thick or strong it was, she had done the same thing once and Jason had stuck a blade in her gut. And that was before he'd been new and improved and modified.

Something pounded against the door hard enough to send vibrations through the chamber they were in.

"Blow the charges!" yelled Brodski.

"We can't," Janessa told him tearfully. "Waylander's got the trigger!"

Time came to a complete stop:

Well, if this isn't the friggin' pits, or whatever they used to say back in the twenty-first century, Waylander thought, struggling to remove the detonator from his belt. Good thing he'd only broken his back when the big son of a bitch had tossed him at the wall. If he'd broken

his neck, he wouldn't have been able to do anything except lie there and wait for things to wind up.

Not that he particularly wanted to die at the moment. More than anything, he wished he could have been on the other side of the door with everyone else. But since things had broken the wrong way for him, so to speak, he was just going to have to make the best of a bad situation.

Fortunately, he hadn't been left completely without alternatives. Even if he wasn't going to get out of this with everybody else, he still had a say in how things ended. He didn't have to just lie there in a crumpled, broken heap and take whatever was coming up next.

But Goddamn, it hurt so much to move, even just a little bit. Pulling the detonator off his belt felt like there was someone wrapping barbed wire around his insides and then pulling it tight. Finally, the small, black box was in his hand. A wave of dizziness went through him as he held it up to look at it and he knew he was very close to passing out. He had to get this thing done fast now, no more screwing around.

"Hey—asshole," he called, raising his voice as best he could in spite of the agony.

Jason turned away from the door and looked at him.

Waylander broke into a broad grin. Hey, at least you know your name, asshole. He held up the detonator so that Jason could see it. Maybe the bastard knew what it was, maybe he didn't; what the hell. Then, still grinning, he pressed the button.

Time started again with a tremendous explosion that knocked them all off their feet. Rowan found herself irrationally trying to cling to the floor as it tilted violently first one way and then the other. It seemed that she could actually feel pieces flying off the main part of the *Grendel* where they were now. Changes in mass and volume, she thought, disoriented. They vibrated through the hull to shake the infrastructure, the skeleton of the ship.

Please, please, she prayed to the ship, trying to press herself even harder against the floor as the last explosions died away. The chamber had stopped rocking but she could still hear and feel rumbling under the distant wailing of sirens. Please, please, please.

She was aware of her lips mouthing the words in silence. The rumbling intensified briefly and then, over a period of fifteen seconds or so, gradually faded away.

Please? Rowan whispered soundlessly.

"Goddamn," she heard Brodski say after some unmeasured period of time. "I think she's going to hold."

Janessa burst into relieved tears.

Rowan pushed herself up from the floor and turned to look at the others. Brodski was standing near one of the portholes with a satisfied expression that was as close as she had ever seen him come to a smile. Tsunaron sat with his back against the lighted platform in the middle of the chamber, blinking dazedly with a mixture of hope and disbelief. He still had Kay-Em's head cradled possessively in his arms, as if there were a real possibility that someone might try to take it away from him.

"I think we're actually going to be all right," he said after a bit. He turned his head slowly to Rowan and gave her a long look of open admiration.

"I'd clap if I could," Kay-Em added cheerfully.

Rowan's gaze fell on Brodski and she saw that he was regarding her in much the same way as Tsunaron. She felt a sharp surge of pride; her plan had worked and she had Brodski's respect. Damn good thing, because if her plan hadn't worked...

There was a cold, plummeting sensation in the pit of her stomach and suddenly she found she was in very real danger of throwing up as the reality crashed in on her. If her plan hadn't worked, Brodski wouldn't have had any respect for her at all. Oh, yeah, that was definitely number one on the long list of crappy outcomes and consequences she would have had to suffer in the event that her idea of disconnecting the walkways had been a nonstarter. There would have been no shortage of bad shit but not having Brodski's respect, that was number one with a bullet. She would have been crying herself to sleep every night for a month. That was assuming, of course, that sheer embarrassment had not killed her right on the spot even before explosive decompression got her and Brodski and everyone else.

Rowan wiped her hands over her face, which was covered with cold sweat. This must be the part where the lucky escape from death

drives me completely over the edge, she thought. Great in a crisis, totally useless when everything's going to be all right. Hysterical laughter was teasing at the edge of her mind with feather-touches.

"*Tiamet* to *Grendel*, come in *Grendel*."

The new voice startled her so much that she actually lost her balance and almost fell. She wasn't the only one, she saw to her immense relief; even Brodski had been caught off-guard. He had to let out a long, noisy breath before he tapped his comm-link and replied.

"*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel*, still here and glad you could join us."

There was a chuckle from the man on the other end. "We have you vectored for approach and emergency docking. Are you ready to get off that boat?"

"That's a big ten-four, good buddy," Rowan murmured, unaware that she was speaking aloud until the words were already out of her mouth.

Brodski gave her an amused look. "Don't know if you caught that, *Tiamat* but in case you did, I translate it roughly as 'What kind of a crazy-assed question is that?'"

"Yeah," Janessa sighed softly. "Let's go home."

Another chuckle. "We copy you just fine, *Grendel*. Hang on."

The rest of the communication was drowned out by a deafening metallic crash as something hit the outside wall of the chamber. The jolt from the impact was minor, however, compared to the change in the room's environment.

All at once, there was a hurricane raging in the chamber.

That was the only thing that Rowan could think as she was knocked off her feet. The wind, the noise, the force. Janessa was screaming again at the top of her lungs, screaming and reaching out to grab something or someone, whatever she could hold onto. Rowan managed to follow her gaze and saw that she was screaming at the sight of an enormous gloved fist sticking out of the wall just a few inches above where her head had been.

Rowan stared openmouthed as the wind roared and shrieked and pulled at her with terrifying strength, while at the same time it started to feel strangely thin and difficult to breathe. In seconds, she was gasping, her lungs pumping like a bellows and yet she couldn't move. The wind was getting stronger, pulling on her, on everyone and everything in the room with more force than anything she had

ever felt in her life. Towards that hand, she realized; everything was being pulled towards that hand sticking out of the wall.

The hand suddenly withdrew and the force of the wind kicked up several more notches. Through the hole that was left, Rowan could see black space dotted with stars.

Then she saw the hand return to take a firm grip on the edge of the hole and then, incredibly, began to pull on the metal, as if to peel it back and make the hole even larger.

Jason's hand, Rowan realized as she clung to a metal grate in the floor. That was Jason's hand. Jason Voorhees was still out there. They had blown up the damaged portion of the ship but Jason Voorhees was still out there and he hadn't finished with them yet.

TWENTY-TWO

"You've got to be shitting me!" Brodski hollered over the roar of air escaping through the hole Jason had punched in the hull. His sidearm actually ripped out of its holster as he strained towards the corridor leading back to the cargo bay.

"We have got to go now!" Tsunaron bellowed. Somewhat unnecessarily, Rowan thought as a small chunk of metal grating from the floor flew up, almost clipping the side of her head as it zoomed past and clanged against the wall. She turned to see Jason's hand pull the grating through the hole, enlarging it that much more.

No, she thought desperately and tried to turn back towards the corridor where Brodski had anchored himself on the doorway with one mighty arm and was reaching out for her with the other. One of the sacks they had carried the charges in whipped through the air and slapped itself onto her face tightly enough to seal off her nose and mouth. Rowan paid no attention to it; smothering was the least of her concerns at the moment. Her feet were starting to skid underneath her so that every step forward barely managed to keep her in place while the vacuum was pulling harder and harder.

Suddenly she felt something clamp onto her wrist and give a mighty tug. Pain screamed up her arm through her shoulder and all the way to the middle of her back as every joint and tendon stretched to within a hair's breadth of ripping apart. Then the bag flapped away and she found herself face to face with Brodski as he hauled her into the corridor with one mighty arm. He pushed her flat against the wall next to which he had braced against the doorway, using his own body in an effort to shield her from as much of the vacuum as possible.

As strong as Brodski was, he wouldn't be able to do that for very much longer, Rowan knew. Why hadn't someone closed the door and sealed off the end of the corridor?

The answer was like a punch in the stomach. Equipment failure; the door wouldn't work. They would have to fight the vacuum's relentless pull for the entire length of the corridor and hope they could close the door at the other end. Rowan turned to look and her heart sank with utter despair.

They would never make it. It was an impossible distance; worse, she could have sworn the corridor was getting longer right before her eyes. She turned back feeling dizzy and caught sight of Tsunaron on the opposite side of the doorway from Brodski had both arms wrapped around Kay-Em's head, pressing it tightly to his chest but he was making no attempt to struggle up the corridor to possible safety.

Neither was Brodski. Rowan's dizziness intensified. Instead, he was anchoring himself against the doorway with his right arm and right leg while stretching his left arm into the chamber. The wind was screaming and screaming and screaming and then she could see Tsunaron screaming with it.

"Janessa! Janessa!"

Abruptly, Rowan's head cleared and she saw Janessa still in the chamber, hanging on to one of the metal grill panels in the floor as she tried to pull herself towards Brodski. The force of the vacuum was pulling on her so hard now that she was stretched out full length in mid-air like a flag in a stiff wind, her toes pointed towards the hole. She reached forward to take hold of another section of the grill to pull herself closer to Brodski's outstretched arm but the panel came up in her hand. The wind tore it away from her easily; a moment later it clanged against the wall and stuck there, directly over the hole like a strainer. Now hanging on by only one hand, Janessa screamed with terror.

Rowan put her mouth close to Brodski's ear and shouted as loud as she could. "I've got an idea!" Without waiting to find out if he had even heard her, she moved carefully along his outstretched arm to his hand and held on, making a human chain and reaching out to Janessa.

She could actually see new hope blossom in Janessa's face. Please, she prayed; please, please, please. She still had no clear idea of whom or what she was praying to, but it seemed to be working. Her face reddening with the exertion, Janessa fought to shove her free hand through the wind towards Rowan's.

She had rings on every finger, Rowan noticed suddenly as their fingertips barely brushed. Lovely silver rings on every finger, even her thumb. Who would have imagined thumb rings would have come back into style after almost five hundred years, her mind blathered.

They were all very pretty but damn, it was going to hurt like hell when Rowan grabbed her hand to pull her to safety, it was going to be sheer agony.

Janessa's fingers touched hers again, closer this time but not quite close enough for Rowan to grab her hand. Another inch; just one more inch and she would have her.

When the fist had crashed through the wall bare inches from her head, Janessa had understood right away what had happened. She had heard herself screaming hysterically as she fought to get out of the chamber and into the corridor with everyone else. Even after the roar of the wind had drowned her out, she had known she was still screaming, just as she had known she should stop immediately. After all, she wasn't hysterical. She knew exactly what was happening and she knew what to do about it. but she could also feel every breath she took in going out by way of her raw throat. No control; she had no control over her body.

Then, as if to underscore the idea and let her know she was right, the door on a narrow cabinet in front of her suddenly slammed open and several small items flew at her head. Automatically, she ducked or tried to and they all missed her. All but the last object, a small box of some kind, a gauge or a meter perhaps. Not quite as large as her hand and weighing only a few ounces, it hit her a glancing blow high in the middle of her forehead, just at her hairline, not even hard enough to draw blood. But it struck her at just the right moment and angle to knock her off balance.

All at once, the open doorway she was straining to get to rushed down and out of sight. The ceiling swept through her vision in a blur, going in the same direction and she realized that her feet were passing over her head. Her inner ear went crazy as if she had just entered a zero gravity environment and had not yet oriented herself to the locally-defined up, down, and lateral.

She had a split-second, upside-down glimpse through the jagged hole in the wall at naked black space peppered with hard pinpoints of light. Then something slammed into the front of her body, knocking the wind out of her.

Her fingers were already clutching the floor panels before her mind had even registered it as something she could hold onto. She felt herself sobbing again, partly in terror and partly from the pain of the metal grid digging into the soft flesh of her fingers. And her rings, which only made things even worse. Stupid fucking rings; cursing them wordlessly, she lifted her head and tried to blink away the tears ripped out of her eyes by the relentless wind.

Brodski appeared in front of her, hanging onto the doorway and reaching out to her. Too far away, she gathered her strength and reached one arm forward as far as it would go to the next floor panel, ignoring the pain in her fingers as she clutched the metal grid.

She started to drag herself forward when suddenly she felt her body leave the floor altogether. Before she even had time to panic, the metal panel she had just grabbed hold of came up out of the floor in her hand. The wind tore it out of her grip and she heard it clang loudly on the wall behind her. She tried to lower herself to the floor again but the wind was too strong; it pushed her back a little more before she could even try to pull herself forward again. Brodski was still calling to her but his hand might as well have been miles away. New tears flooded her eyes and she could feel herself sobbing even harder.

"Take my hand! Janessa, look at me—take my hand!"

Her vision cleared and now she saw that Rowan was hanging onto Brodski's outstretched arm with one hand and straining towards her with the other.

Yes! she thought with a sudden fierce surge of hope and put everything she had into reaching for the other woman's hand.

Their fingers barely brushed and Janessa howled with terror and frustration as the pull of the vacuum began to overwhelm her. She could feel herself actually starting to lose ground now and she couldn't do that, she was almost close enough, for crying out loud!

She was touching Rowan's fingers again, really touching this time. All they really had to do was curl their fingers down so that they each were making a fist, and their hands would be hooked together securely enough to... But their hands were already sliding apart again. Janessa felt herself losing another couple of inches and grabbed the metal floor panel with her free hand. She had to try to pull herself forward again, she thought, panting and sobbing with

effort. All at once, she was aware of how the muscles in her arms were burning from the strain of hanging on. No, not just burning, weakening. Fading. There was nothing left, no more strength in her arms or her hands or her fingers, or even her will, for that matter.

She looked up at Rowan who was still reaching towards her, yelling for her to take hold of her hand. Suddenly there were so many things she wanted to say. She wanted to tell them close the door, to beg them not to let her die, to tell Rowan she was the bravest person she'd ever known, to tell Tsunaron that it hadn't all been just a game with her, that she had actually started to develop real feelings for him, to ask Brodski to remember her as more than just a sex goddess, to please, please, please, do something, couldn't the *Tiamat* save her somehow—

Her fingers loosened and she blurted out the first thing she could think of.

"Oooohh, this sucks on so many levels!"

Then she let go.

If Brodski had not yanked her back into the corridor, Rowan would have seen it happen and she knew it. How he had found the strength to drag her out of the chamber in one fiercely powerful motion astonished her almost as much as the fact that he managed to do it without dislocating her shoulder in the process. She had a glimpse of Brodski's face in passing; the expression on it terrified her. Tsunaron screamed Janessa's name and suddenly the roar of the wind cut out almost completely, just for the briefest of moments. There was the hideous wet sound of flesh and bone forcibly ripping, cracking, tearing, shredding impossibly fast. Then the roar of air escaping through the hole swelled again.

Unable to help herself, Rowan turned to look and almost immediately averted her gaze. There was very little left on the metal grating. Only a few unrecognizable tatters of the very, very partial remains of a very pretty, slightly spoiled young woman whose temperament had actually been a good deal sweeter and more vulnerable than she had ever let on to anyone else.

All at once, the roar of the wind began to fade away along with the relentless pull of the vacuum as Brodski closed the door. Working

after all, Rowan thought dully as Brodski hustled her towards the cargo bay. Lucky us. Lucky, lucky us.

They had escaped into the rest of the ship by the time Jason punched his way through the wall into the chamber. The atmosphere gone now, he floated across the room, raised his machete to hack through the door, and then paused as his new, improved, modified eyes caught sight of the controls on the wall. The ants had not had much to work with in terms of higher brain function but his capacity to use tools had required only a little enhancement. His brain replayed the last few minutes, lingering over the violent expulsion of the girl's pulped bone and tissue through the metal grid. Death, yes, but only death, not by his hand. No murder, no rage, no fear. No meaning

Now the rest of them were elsewhere in the ship. He could feel them even from outside, in total vacuum, just as he could feel the approach of others like them. Coming to save them, or so they thought. If he crashed through the door and destroyed it, there would be no one struggling to resist the Vacuum except himself. He was strong enough, that was no problem. But it would take longer to get to them.

Jason opened the door, pulled himself through it with only a little effort, and closed it behind him.

Now they were securely trapped in the ship with him. Waiting for the others to arrive.

TWENTY-THREE

They had closed every door between the corridor and the shuttle bay and then Brodski had shot out the controls to jam them shut. The only problem, as Rowan saw it, was that there weren't enough doors.

Just because Jason Voorhees hadn't smashed his way through the door to the corridor didn't mean that he couldn't have. Which meant that their fixing all the rest of the doors so he couldn't simply open them didn't mean they had managed to lock him out.

"Maybe not," Brodski told her. "Maybe we'll only slow him down long enough so we can get our asses off this wreck and onto the *Tiamat*. I can settle for that. How about you?"

"I'm good to go," she conceded.

Brodski was about to say something else when they heard a rhythmic pounding, distant but powerful enough to feel as well as hear, and they had only been able to stand and stare at each other in silence. After some unmeasured period of time, Rowan realized that she had been clutching Brodski's arm so tightly that her fingers were starting to cramp. She had had to pry them off one by one. Brodski had not complained but then, she wasn't sure that he had even noticed—the muscle was so hard, she felt as if she had been gripping a rock.

"*Grendel*, this is *Tiamat*."

Rowan jumped at the sound of the pilot's voice echoing through the shuttle bay but she was relieved to have something else to listen to besides the sound of Jason Voorhees coming to get them.

"*Tiamat*, we copy," Brodski answered briskly. "We are in the shuttle bay at the evac door."

"So are we, *Grendel*. Visual indicates you have sustained extensive damage to your hull in this area and we are unable to dock normally. We are deploying the emergency evacuation slide instead. Hang on, we'll have you off that boat shortly. What the hell happened to you?"

Brodski gave a grim chuckle. "That's a long story, *Tiamat*. Hope you brought whisky."

"That's affirmative, *Grendel*. Stand by, we are deploying the slide... now."

"Copy that." Brodski moved to a porthole and then beckoned Rowan to join him so she could see what was happening.

The small ship floating outside was the same model as the shuttle they had lost when Kinsa had panicked; the memory triggered the mental image of Kinsa and Janessa together and Rowan found herself almost overcome by the urge to weep. She swallowed hard several times, pushing it down while she kept her gaze fixed on the long, blue tube that was currently extruding from the center of the *Tiamat* towards the evacuation door.

Never saw anything like this in a movie, she thought, trying to keep herself distracted. Sure didn't look like the sort of thing that called for "The Blue Danube" or any other Strauss waltz as background music. That tube had to be at least a hundred feet long, which suggested something more along the lines of Ravel's "Bolero", maybe. Or anything by Barry White.

Now both laughter and tears threatened; Rowan moved quickly away from the porthole, biting her lip and ordering herself to get a grip. A few feet away, Tsunaron looked up from the freestanding console he was working on and raised his eyebrows at her. Rowan put up a hand, willing him not to say anything; to her relief, he turned his attention back to the console and to Kay-Em's head, murmuring helpfully to him from the crook of his left arm.

Rowan scrubbed her hands roughly over her face. If she bit her lip any harder, she was going to bite it clean off. If you can't keep your shit together for all the right reasons, then do it just to impress Brodski, she ordered herself.

Abruptly something thudded against the other side of the evacuation door.

"*Tiamat* to *Grendel*, slide and lifeline secured. Stand by while we initiate collar seal and pressurization."

"Roger, *Tiamat*," Brodski said and turned to Tsunaron.

Tsunaron held up his index finger, keeping his gaze fixed on the console. A few seconds later, he nodded. "Readings indicate seal is holding," he said.

"*Tiamat*, we're good to go on this end," Brodski announced. "Opening outer doors now." He pressed a lighted panel on the wall under the speaker.

The smooth electronic hum of the mechanism powering up was almost immediately drowned out by the classic high-pitched grinding noise of complete malfunction. Brodski cursed, slamming one meaty fist against the cut-out button.

"Let me guess," Rowan sighed. "We just got another visit from the Fuck-Up Fairy."

"Hang on, hang on," Tsunaron said quickly. "Let me give it a try from here, see if I can override." His fingers danced over the console briefly; then he looked over at the door. Nothing this time, not even a grinding noise. He glanced up at Rowan and Brodski again. "Okay, let me try something else."

Rowan estimated he actually tried three or four times before he finally stepped back from the console, shoulders slumped in defeat.

"It's the exterior motor," he said, looking at Brodski with a painful grimace. "It's intact but it can't get any power."

Brodski had already pried open a nearby panel and was making a quick but thorough examination of the contents. Obviously, he knew what he was doing but to Rowan, he seemed to be pawing through a hopeless tangle of silver and gold ribbons connecting a motley assortment of geodes, jewel-encrusted circuit-boards, and Christmas tree lights.

"You're right," he said after a bit. "There's no way we can get it open from here."

"What can we do?" Rowan asked, trying not to give in to the panic rising in her like cold water.

Brodski was about to answer when they heard more pounding from elsewhere in the ship, obviously closer this time. "EVA," Brodski said, looking grim.

"I don't think we have time," Tsunaron said, glancing in the direction of the noise.

"We don't have a choice," said Brodski and turned to Rowan. "I'll need you here on this side."

"Wait a minute," Rowan said. "Who's Eva?"

"Spacewalk," Brodski said over his shoulder, already heading for the cargo bay.

"Extra-vehicular activity," Kay-Em added.

"Oh. Right." Rowan frowned. The idea of Brodski outside the ship made her slightly queasy. She turned to Tsunaron looking dubious.

"It's worth a shot," he told her. "If he can jump the leads out there, we can reroute them in here. With any luck, that will open the door and we get off this thing before it blows the hell up. Or..." he jerked his head in the direction of the pounding.

"Okay, sounds like a good plan to me," Rowan said, hoping it really was

"*Tiamat*, this is *Grendel*," Tsunaron said, passing Kay-Em's head to Rowan so he could use both hands on the console. "Our escape hatch is jammed. We're going EVA to try to patch it up."

"Copy that, *Grendel*, but you had better get a move on," the pilot answered, not hiding his concern. "Systems show you are leaking serious nitromethane. Plus your life-support pretty much ain't. You get off now or you don't get off."

"We're on it, *Tiamat*," Tsunaron said. "Just a few more minutes."

"Tsunaron, do you read me? I'm suited up and in the maintenance hatch," said Brodski's voice.

"We read you, sarge," Tsunaron answered, taking Kay-Em's head back from Rowan.

"Okay. Opening outer doors now."

Tsunaron turned to Rowan again and gave her an encouraging nod just as they heard Jason pound his way through another door, this one close enough for them to feel the floor vibrate.

"Jesus," Tsunaron said. "Those hatches aren't going to keep him out of here for very much longer. The son of a bitch is just kicking them down now. We need to buy more time." He cut off suddenly and turned to Rowan. "Hey, you were the expert on this guy, right?"

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"A diversion," he said. "Tell me everything you know about Jason Voorhees and Crystal Lake."

Rowan blinked at him. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

"Okay," Tsunaron said, "let me rephrase that..."

In the end, Rowan wasn't sure whom she was more amazed at, Tsunaron for catching onto the whole thing so quickly or herself for being able to boil it all down for him. And Kay-Em, of course.

When Tsunaron had first explained what he had in mind, she had been completely skeptical. But then Kay-Em had chimed in with her support and she shut up. Mostly because she suddenly became aware that she was arguing over the feasibility of a plan involving the use of technology five hundred years more advanced than anything she knew, and she was doing it with the detached head of an intelligent android.

Besides, Brodski needed her. Or he thought he needed her, at least. Tsunaron had assured her that everything looked a lot more complicated than it was. Brodski knew the configuration for every kind of operations hardware so well he could have taken them apart and put them back together in his sleep. Once he started talking her through what she needed to do, it would all make sense, at least until the job was done and they got the door open.

Make that *if* they got the door open, Rowan amended silently. She wasn't sure whether Tsunaron was overestimating Brodski's skills as a communicator or her intelligence. On the other hand, she found it easier to believe that Brodski would be able to talk her through a complicated repair job than Tsunaron's planned diversion could work.

"Okay, I'm out here and I'm in place," Brodski's voice announced from the speaker. "Let's do this thing. Rowan, you ready?"

Rowan picked up the long thin glass tube Brodski had told her she would need and went over to the open panel. "Standing by."

"Okay. I'm going to bypass the main power supply unit and send it to you."

"Um, send it?" she said uncertainly, glancing over at Tsunaron. He had just finished wiring Kay-Em's head to the console by way of the wires and cables showing in the stump of her neck. Even with no practical knowledge, Rowan could see most of the connections were improvised and she suspected that a few of them were exercises in applied optimism rather than proven methods of making do. Kay-Em seemed to be coping, although Rowan wasn't exactly sure how she would have been able to tell the difference. "How will I know I got it?"

"Just listen," Brodski said, calm but firm. "There's a red wire next to a red and blue striped conductor. You see it?"

Rowan frowned. She saw nothing but ribbons. Cautiously, she moved some of them to one side with her finger and then spotted several strands of what she'd been thinking of as Christmas lights.

For a moment, she thought two of them were red but when she took closer look, she saw that one of them was orange. "Found it."

"Good," Brodski said, and Rowan almost laughed aloud at the relief in his voice. It's okay, man, I'm even more relieved than you are, she wanted to tell him. "Disconnect it and hold it free. Do not let it touch anything else."

"Got it." Just as she took the wire between her thumb and forefinger, there was a spray of sparks from somewhere else inside the panel and the lights dimmed briefly. Rowan cried out, startled.

"Was that you or me?" Tsunaron asked her.

Before she could ask him how she was supposed to know the difference, there was an explosion at the other end of the Grendel and the shuttle bay shuddered and rocked, throwing her against the jammed door. She cried out in momentary panic, thinking that either the wire had touched everything in the cabinet or she had ripped it out completely. But when the shuttle bay steadied, they were all still alive and Brodski was still talking to her.

"When I tell you to take that wire and attach it to the terminal in the lower left corner. Find it first. It has two yellow leads going in."

"Right," Rowan murmured, poking around carefully with her index finger. Finally she found what looked like two skinny yellow satin ribbons attached to a piece of onyx-like material about the size of a credit card. Tie two yellow ribbons around the old onyx Amex, it's been four long centuries... She shoved the thought away and checked to make sure there was nothing else in the immediate vicinity that could have fit the same description before she said, "I see it."

"Good," Brodski told her. "Now, you're gonna connect the red wire to the terminal. There's a notch on the edge opposite where the yellow leads go in. That's your hook-up."

"All right," she said, obeying. "Then what?"

"Then you do absolutely nothing else," he said tensely. "Until I tell you."

"You got it," Rowan promised.

Another explosion rocked the shuttle bay, this one definitely closer.

"Tiamat to *Grendel*, just thought you might be interested to know that was another part of your hull," said the pilot. "You are running out of time."

"Copy that, Tiamat," came Brodski's voice, not quite snapping at him. "Just a few more minutes."

"If that," Tsunaron added nervously. "We're working very hard and very fast, right guys?"

The Tiamat's pilot hesitated. "We can disengage and come around again."

"Negative, Tiamat, no way!" Tsunaron barked. "Just another minute, that's all!"

"Copy that." The other man sighed. "We'll stand by as long as we can, *Grendel*."

But no longer, Rowan added silently.

Abruptly, there were several loud booms from the cargo bay followed by the unmistakable sound of thick metal buckling and giving way. Rowan turned to Tsunaron but her mouth had gone dry and she couldn't make a sound.

"Shit, he's here," Tsunaron said. "You ready, Kay?"

Kay-Em actually chuckled. "I was built ready. baby."

"Initiate."

Rowan's dry mouth fell open as she stared through the entry to the cargo bay. The place was all lit up in shimmering colors, sky blue and daisy yellow, cloud white and iris purple, but predominantly earthy greens and browns amid golden light that made her think of late afternoon sunshine.

Oh my God, she thought, almost dropping the terminal and wires in shock as the colors began to solidify into definite shapes. Oh my God, they did it. Tsunaron and Kay-Em actually did it. They actually recreated Crystal Lake.

TWENTY-FOUR

It was not a wonder that Jason Voorhees felt as Crystal Lake shimmered into existence around him. He was not even confused, not really, not in the sense that any living intelligence could feel confusion or bewilderment to the point of questioning circumstances and events. For anti-life, nothing was ever in question.

But it was for that very reason that Jason could be distracted, even in his new, improved modified state. The new cleverness the ants had bestowed on him for making use of more sophisticated tools had nothing to do with imaginations, there were still only five elements: himself, prey, weapons, obstacles, and killing ground.

If he thought anything at all about his surroundings now, it was only that this was a killing ground familiar to him.

He turned in a slow circle, taking in the gently rippling lake, the woods, and the clearing where he was right now. There was a small birch tree near the shore, the bark peeling away in layers here and there. Just at the point where the trunk divided in two was a heart with initials inside which had been carved clumsily into the wood. There were more hearts and initials cut into a weathered wooden chair a few feet away; it was stuck into the ground right next to a stone path. Jason followed it with his eyes and saw that it led up to the front door of a cabin.

All at once, the afternoon sunlight was gone and it was the middle of the night, complete with sound effects. Had Jason paid attention to such things. It might have occurred to him that the cricked and frog population had increased by a factor of ten since the last time he had been here.

What he did notice was the moon, which appeared through the trees directly in front of him. It was close to the ground and about the size of the cabin, if not bigger. He had never seen the moon that way, but all it meant to him was that the prey would have more light to see by.

Hefting his machete, Jason took a step towards the cabin and then hesitated. No one there. In the woods then. He stood motionless, his

head lifted and tipped to one side, ignoring the wind rustling in the trees as well as the overdone nocturnal chorus.

When he had first prowled his killing ground, his ability to sense prey had been nowhere near as well-developed. In the beginning, it had felt sometimes as if he were smelling them and other times as if he were hearing them. Later on, it was more like he could smell the sounds they made. Eventually, he simply knew what he knew.

Had the long dead Dr Aloysius Wimmer or any of his late contemporaries been able to study Jason in depth, they might have discovered that his mechanism for sensing live humans operated in a way that was vaguely analogous to how a hay fever sufferer detected the presence of ragweed.

Or not; it might never have occurred to them that they could not take an approach to understanding him in terms of something that was alive. Ironically, this meant that in some respects, Jason Voorhees actually had a better comprehension of the nature of life than any human being ever would. With the possible exception of Kay-Em, that is; she had retained a complete understanding of everything involved in the process of becoming human, although, like any other human being, she lacked even a rudimentary vocabulary to articulate it.

However, this did enable her to create a holographic representation of Crystal Lake that was completely convincing, despite certain variations from the original, some of which so glaringly obvious that Jason would not have paused to look twice on his death-march to the shuttle bay.

She knew, of course, that he would not question the reality of being on the *Grendel* in one moment and then back to Crystal Lake in the next. But he would not be distracted unless he sensed the imminent presence of human life in his immediate surroundings. More than simply drawing on topographical data and interpolating the details of flora and fauna, she had to imbue the place with an

overall atmosphere, an ambience that Jason would take to mean that humans could be hunted and killed here.

After some time, Jason took a few steps towards the cabin, peering past it into the shadowy edge of the forest. Then he turned and moved down to the water line. He waited again before suddenly turning to his left and striding quickly along the stone path, away from the cabin.

He had only gone a few yards before he stopped again. Something was very, very wrong here. For the first time, he could feel his prey actually eluding him.

This was not how it worked. How it worked was, he sensed humans, he went to where they were, and he killed them. Usually, they ran to another location but that didn't matter. Once he sensed them, he knew where they were, regardless of how they changed direction trying to escape him.

They did not vanish from his awareness as he moved towards them and then suddenly register on his senses as being somewhere else entirely. That did not happen. It couldn't.

There were humans here—everything he *was* told him there were definitely humans here.

And there were also humans nearby, the ones he had been hunting when he had suddenly returned to the old killing ground. He still felt them and when he moved towards them, nothing changed.

As he started walking back towards the cabin, he saw everything in front of him ripple like water, once and then twice more. Now there seemed to be a light in the window. Someone was inside after all.

No, not inside—he was actually looking all the way through the cabin and out another window at something in the forest beyond. He skirted the cabin and suddenly, a small flight of stairs appeared in the shadows along with a metal platform and an entryway to an area where a man was standing in front of some equipment. A woman's head was attached to it. Jason recognized the head at the same moment that the man looked up and saw him.

"Oops!" Tsunaron said.

Rowan looked up sharply from the two diodes she was holding in either hand. Brodski had told her she had to use the blue one but they both looked blue to her. "What do you mean, 'oops?'" She glared at Tsunaron's back, trying to will him to turn around.

He didn't. "Nothing," he said quickly.

"Not nothing, you don't just say 'oops'. What 'oops?'" Rowan demanded.

Tsunaron let out a heavy sigh. "I think he saw me."

"Wonderful," Rowan groaned. "If you've got something brilliant up your sleeve, now's the time to do it!"

"I got something," Tsunaron said. "Kay, you still with me?"

"Where else would I be?" she said genially.

"Okay. Repair variations using data file Crystal Lake nineteen hundred eighty."

There was a brief pause; Kay-Em frowned thoughtfully, her eyes moving from side to side. "Ready. Here goes nothin'!"

Rowan was no longer listening. Her gaze fell on the diodes she was holding and suddenly she could see that the one in her left hand was turquoise, not blue. The difference between them was so incredibly obvious that she couldn't understand how she hadn't seen it right away.

"Hey, you!" Jason whirled. The two giggling females were standing in a grassy area with the moon right behind them, wearing nothing but little belly shirts and panties along with their big mindless smiles. One of them held up a bottle and wiggled it at him.

"You want a beer?" she asked, giggling some more.

"Or do you want to smoke some pot?" added the other one, producing a joint.

"Or we could just have pre-marital sex!" said the first one cheerfully.

He stared as they tossed away the beer and the joint to pull their shirts off over their heads. Topless now, they each struck a pose as if they were having their picture taken.

"We just love pre-marital sex!" they said in unison.

Jason raised his machete and advanced on them. But instead of screaming and running away, they only climbed into a pair of

sleeping bags lying on the grass behind them and continued to giggle as heartily as ever.

He bent over and took a closer look at them. They registered as live humans but oddly. Were these the ones he had sensed eluding him before? Why didn't they do that now if they could? Or scream and run?

Defective. They were defective. Like him, when he had been a living creature.

No, not like him. They were happy; no one would want to hurt them.

That settled, he zipped them into their sleeping bags and bashed them alternately against each other and a nearby tree. Finally they started squealing and screaming and they kept it up long after other humans would have stopped. He would not have cared how long it went on except that in between, they were also still giggling.

Having resolved the diode crisis successfully, Rowan was relieved to finish making the last of the connections without anything blowing up, even just slightly. Brodski had to be a genius to talk her through everything but despite Tsunaron's assurances, the hardware in the cabinet made even less sense to her than ever. But that was okay. Making sense was optional; all she really wanted it to do at this point was work.

"All right, Rowan," Brodski said, "give it a try now!"

Obediently, she hit the door panel. "Here we go!"

Nothing.

Rowan flung herself at the unresponsive metal, pounding both fists on it. "Goddamn it, you fucking piece of shit!"

"Okay, okay," Brodski was saying. "Calm down, I'm gonna try something else. Stand by."

What something else?! Rowan tried to say but nothing came out except a wordless angry wail.

Then she heard Tsunaron say, with new panic in his voice, "He's done with the campers!"

"Already?" replied Kay-Em, calm but impressed. "Wow, he's good."

"Too good," Tsunaron said. "He's coming back!"

Rowan turned towards the cargo bay and saw him standing against the incongruous backdrop of Crystal Lake. She noted absently that it was amazingly authentic; just not authentic enough to keep Jason occupied long enough to let them get away.

He started moving quickly towards the shuttle bay again, reaching down to grab his machete without having to pause. Rowan stumbled back several steps and fetched up against the useless fucking piece of shit door, her mind blank with panic.

All at once, Brodski's voice blared in her comm-link. "How about now?"

She heard a soft hiss behind her and whirled to find herself staring into a long blue tube-shaped passageway leading to another open door.

"Sarge, it worked! You are a god!" Tsunaron yelled

"We going to see you any time soon, Brodski?" Rowan added tensely.

"I'm on my way," Brodski promised.

She saw Tsunaron reaching for Kay-Em's head on the console and then all at once they were all rolling on the floor which was tilting and juddering in the aftermath of another explosion. Sparks sprayed down from the ceiling and out from the walls.

Rowan tried to get to her feet when the floor tilted sharply again and Tsunaron went flying past her to meet the opposite wall head first. To her horror, he immediately went limp, dropping to the floor like a rag.

"Tsunaron!" she screamed and threw herself on him as bits of the ceiling itself started raining down along with more sparks. Both Brodski and the pilot of the *Tiamat* were yelling for them to get out of there, get out of there right now but she could barely hear them over the ongoing explosions.

The shuttle bay was shaking so much now that she couldn't tell whether Tsunaron was responding to her attempts to revive him or not. Finally, she just tried hauling him to his feet, intending to drag him through the escape tube to the other ship if she had to. But that seemed to do the trick; he woke up and managed to stagger along beside her while blood poured out of a gash in his forehead.

They stumbled across the opening into the *Tiamat* almost before Rowan realized they had made it. She half-dropped Tsunaron into a padded seat and turned to shut the door.

"Kay-Em," Tsunaron pleaded hoarsely.

Rowan stumbled back through the passageway without pausing even to indicate she had even heard him.

Most of the lights in the shuttle bay were out now and the few that remained were flickering on and off. The whole place was shaking so violently that Kay-Em's head had torn loose from the console and was rolling around on the floor so that Rowan actually had to chase it. God, she thought, what if Kay-Em was so damaged that... But except for a few smudges of dirt and an area of singed hair, Kay-Em seemed to be functioning as well as ever.

"Thanks," she said cheerfully as Rowan brushed some ashes off the bridge of her nose.

"Come on, *Grendel*, we gotta go now!" yelled the *Tiamat's* pilot.

"Better hurry," Kay-Em added helpfully. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Rowan tucked the head securely under her arm and fought to keep her balance while the floor rocked back and forth again.

And then suddenly there he was, standing at the entrance to the shuttle bay. In spite of the failing light, she could see his red eyes clearly in the eyeholes of the steel mask. He knew her; he had marked her, he owned her. And now, after a period of interruption, he had come to claim her. Abruptly, she shook off the strange hypnotic trance that had started to fall over her.

"Not in this lifetime, asshole!" she yelled and bolted down to the tube to the *Tiamat*.

Tsunaron was waiting at the door. The moment she crossed the threshold with Kay-Em's head, he hit the controls and closed the hatch behind her.

"Brodski!" Rowan said breathlessly and ran to look through the window in the hatch. She had a brief glimpse of Jason starting towards the passageway, machete in one raised hand. And just behind him, another figure in a red spacesuit and helmet, bringing his fist down on the console Tsunaron and Kay-Em had been using.

The shuttle bay door slammed shut. Rowan blinked and suddenly the *Grendel* was only a third the size it had been a moment before.

"Brodski, no!"

The ship exploded before the second word was even out of her mouth.

"No," Rowan whispered, staring at the fireball where the *Grendel* had been. "No. Brodski. No." She knew the hand Tsunaron put on her shoulder was meant to be comforting; it was also trembling and she wasn't sure if he were aware of that. Or maybe it was just that she was trembling so hard. She clasped her hands tightly together in an attempt to steady herself. He didn't get you. You're alive, she said silently, over and over. You're alive. He didn't get you.

The fireball continued to writhe against the starry darkness and now she could make out fragments and debris flying out in all directions from it. Oh, God, what if she saw something she didn't want to, like—

She started to turn away when suddenly she did see something she hadn't wanted to. But it wasn't part of a corpse of someone like Waylander or Brodski tumbling end over end in flames; it was something much, much worse.

Light from the fireball glinted off the steel mask and the machete he was holding as he grew bigger and bigger in the view plate.

"My God," breathed Tsunaron. "He's coming this way."

Yes, he was, Rowan thought, unable to move. He was coming right this way and he was looking directly at her as he did. Those red eyes.

Told you already: I know you. I put my mark on you. I own you. And no matter what, I am coming to claim you.

She could feel the machete slice through several inches of steel into her gut all over again, as vividly as if it had happened a minute ago, as if it were happening to her right now. Rowan would have sworn that she had almost been able to see her own doomed face reflected in the shiny steel mask when some kind of big red projectile flew in out of nowhere to slam into Jason and knock him completely off course.

"Brodski!" she gasped, realizing only when she heard herself say his name. She ran to another porthole just in time to see him speeding away still holding onto Jason. A flame flickered briefly from something on the back of his suit and she saw that their course had altered. They were now heading directly towards a beautiful blue and green planet laced with white clouds. The outline of the continents and oceans was completely unfamiliar, but she knew this had to be Earth II.

Her first view of Earth II. That made Brodski her first falling star. Somehow, she just couldn't bring herself to make a wish.

"He's gone," Tsunaron said faintly. "He's gone and it's over."

Rowan turned to look at him. "I can't believe it," she said. It was the truth. She couldn't. It hadn't sunk in yet and when it did, whatever happiness and relief she might feel would be tempered by sorrow for the loss of so many lives and grief for Sergeant Brodski.

"Tsunaron?" came Kay-Em's voice, a bit muffled.

Tsunaron jumped slightly and took Kay-Em's head out from under his arm. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously, holding her head carefully in both hands.

"Oh, sure," she said. Her tone was still cheerful but Rowan thought her voice had started to weaken, too. "I'll be back on my feet in no time." Pause. "As soon as I have some."

Ba-dum-ching, Rowan's mind said absurdly while Tsunaron laughed with relief.

"I'll get right on that," he promised her. Then he looked up at Rowan again questioningly.

How am I doing? Not nearly so witty. I hope people still do therapy in this day and age, because I'm going to need a lot of it.

She turned back to look at the planet slowly getting larger in the window. There would be nothing left of Jason Voorhees now. Nothing left to sully this new world. Nothing left to be afraid of.

"It's beautiful," she said.

EPILOG

Among the many things both good and bad, wonderful and not so wonderful, that survived the great evacuation from Earth were small traditions considered unimportant but immortal nonetheless. Some examples would include playing loves-me-loves-me-not with daisy petals, kissing under mistletoe, and making a wish on a falling star.

The falling star that Rowan had not been able to bring herself to wish on did not go unnoticed or unused. A young couple sitting on a blanket a short distance from a country lake just after sunset happened to look up at just the right moment to see an especially large, bright object cut a brilliant downward arc against the sky.

"A shooting star!" the woman said, as they stood up together, trying to see where it fell.

"Make a wish," the man replied, and was delighted when she kissed him.

"It landed in the lake," she said.

He looked at her fondly. She sounded so sure than he actually wanted to believe her, despite the fact that it seemed pretty unlikely to him. Even if she were right, it was even more unlikely that they would find anything. Nothing could survive an unprotected trip through the planet's atmosphere unless it was something very, very big or very, very unnatural.

But what the hell, he thought, looking at her beautiful face. On a night like this, anything could happen. Even the impossible.

And if it didn't, they could settle for the usual great sex.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go check it out."